Thomas M. Disch on "the Labor Day group"

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

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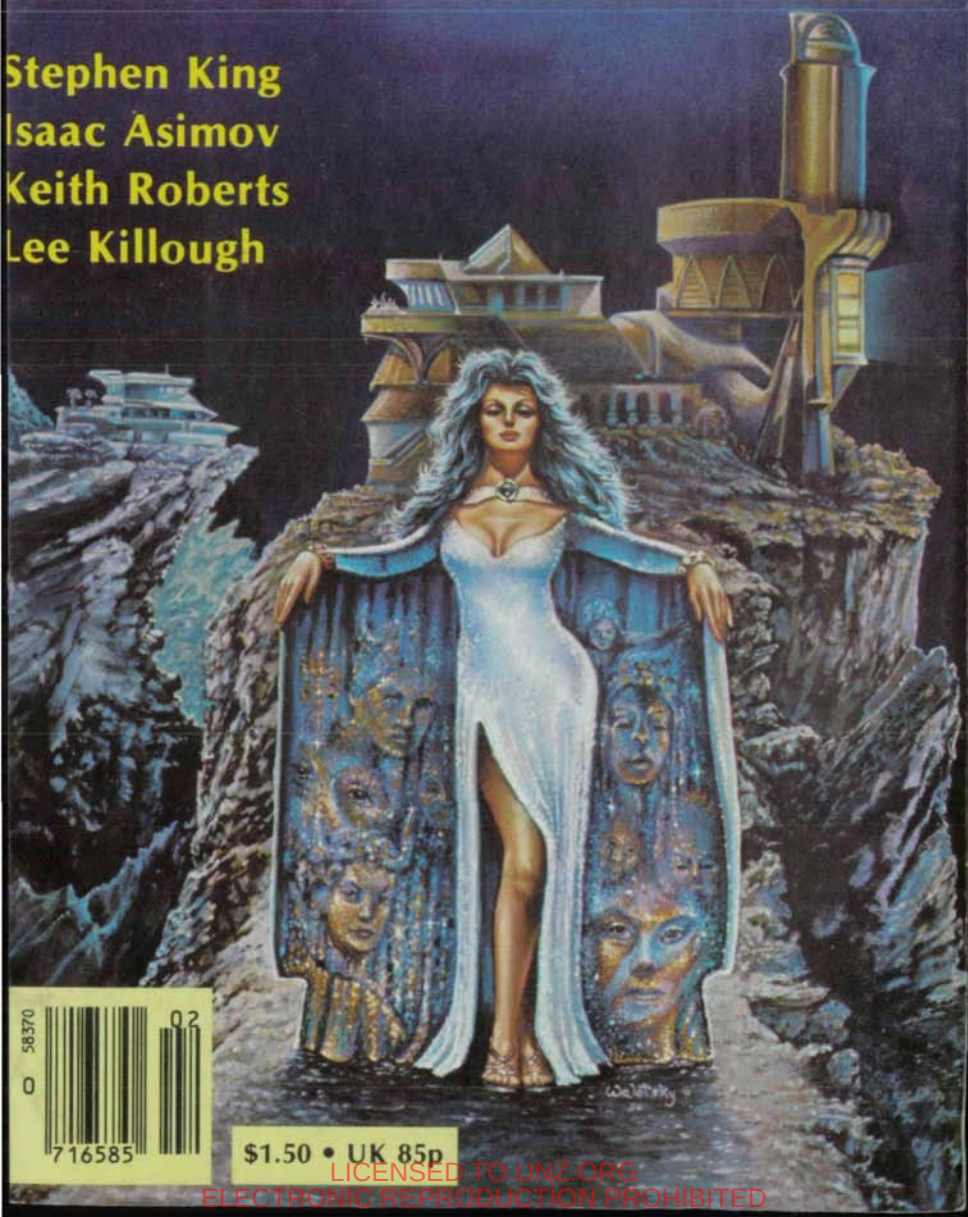

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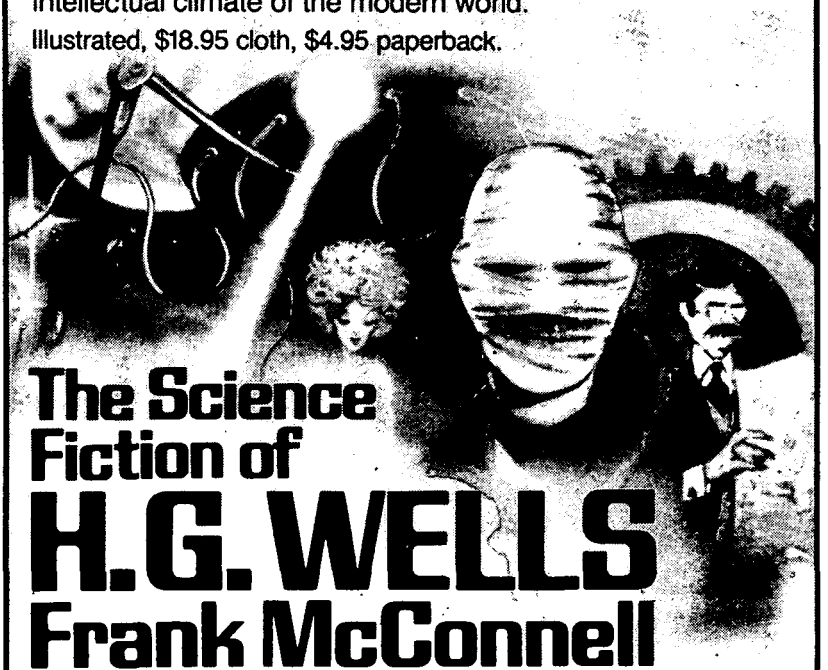

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NOVELETS

THE ORACLE AND THE MOUNTAINS	19	Stephen King
THE ORPHEUS IMPLANT	57	Nicholas Yermakov
THE LILITH	84	Jim Aikin

SHORT STORIES

MENAGE OUTRE	5	Lee Killough
... THE FINAL PACT WITH THE DEVIL STORY	48	Michael Armstrong
IN OUR IMAGE	78	Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg
THE SOFTEST HAMMER	105	Charles Sheffield
SECOND COMINGS — REASONABLE RATES	117	Pat Cadigan
THE CHECKOUT	139	Keith Roberts

DEPARTMENTS

CARTOON	39	Gahan Wilson
BOOKS	40	Thomas M. Disch
FILMS: Strike Stricken	81	Baird Searles
THE REVOLTING TALE OF HEEDLESS JACK ...	104	Russell M. Griffin
SCIENCE: Nothing and All	120	Isaac Asimov
ACROSTIC PUZZLE	158	Rachel Cosgrove Payes

COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "MENAGE OUTRE"

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 60, No. 2, Whole No. 357; Feb. 1981. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.50 per copy. Annual subscription $15.00; $17.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 15%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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Lee Killough's fine series about an artists' colony of the future known as Aventine will be collected soon in book form by Del Rey. The last Aventine story here was "Broken Stairways, Walls of Time," (March 1979), and here is the latest; the artist is a beautiful woman, a sculptor, but with her own unusual idea of what constitutes beauty....

Ménage Outré

BY

LEE KILLOUGH

At night the sound of flutes and drums pulsed across the lawns toward my villa from the miniature castle next door. The high, repetitive melody of the pipe wailed a counterpart to the drumbeat, and everything about me felt as though it were resonating to the atavistic rhythm, from the glass walls of my villa to the moon-rimed waters of the Lunamere licking at the cliffs below my terrace. Even my bones reverberated.

I stood on the terrace watching the lights of Aventine shine like stars on the mountainside and staring at the castle. The Radleighs were in Europe for the summer, I knew. Who had leased their house? Lights showed through the draped windows on the lower floor, but there was no obvious acttivity inside. The occupants all seemed to be on the crenelated battlements. In the darkness there they leaped and gyrated in time to the throbbing beat... shadows, black against black. Only one was clearly visible, and that one stood alone, tall and straight, silhouetted against the lemon disc of the rising moon.

"Do you suppose the Radleighs let the house to neopagans?

My sister Dee moved behind me near the sliding doors from the study. "I don't know."

I turned to look at her. Even here in the darkness, where her awkward nose and jaw were only a blur, she did not look back but kept her head bent, her eyes on her feet.

I frowned. "I was in the study all day finishing the program for the new novel, but you must have seen them moving in."

The long oval of her face lengthened and foreshortened again as she nodded.

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"Who are they?"

"I...didn't talk to any of them."

I sighed. No, of course she had not. Except for me, about the only other person she spoke to face-to-face was Krista Beck, the girl who helped her keep house. "Can you at least tell me what they look like?"

"There is a woman. She's...very beautiful." The last word was wistful.

I looked back at the figure before the moon. It was distorted now, bent toward the gyrating shadows. Above the flutes and drums, a laugh carried to me. When the figure straightened again, it was in profile and definitely feminine.

"Well," I said, "there's no time like the present to meet them."

I headed for the hedge dividing the two properties. Dee did not follow, but I had not expected her to. Approaching the castle, I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Hello on the battlements."

Movement stopped with the abruptness of a thrown switch. The tall woman moved along the battlement to step into a crenelation directly above me. "Hello below." It was a rich voice, feminine, with an accent. I tried to place it. Mostly British, but mixed with something else.

Around her, the others clustered at all heights. What were they doing, having a costume party? The moonlight outlined some very peculiar shapes, including what looked like plumed and horned helmets.

"I'm your neighbor Jason Ward."

"Oh, yes, the novelist. Mr. Gordon, the realtor, mentioned you. I'm Simha Barnard. What may I do for you?"

Her name sounded familiar, but I could not remember where I had heard it before. "I thought that as we're living next door to each other, we ought to become acquainted."

There was a pause, then: "Of course. I'll be right down."

She disappeared from the crenelation. The others remained, however, staring down at me and talking among themselves. One of them said, "I hard ly think so," in answer to some question I had not heard, and all of them laughed. I had the uncomfortable feeling the question had been about me.

Presently the great door rolled back. I stepped back, too, involuntarily. In the opening appeared not the woman I had been expecting but the squat shape of a hunchbacked dwarf. His face looked as though the two halves of it had been glued together without being checked for alignment first. The higher eye peered up at me and his mouth produced a twisted diagonal of a smile.

"Come in, please."

I crossed the little drawbridge and stepped under the portcullis through the door. The hunchback shut the door behind me. The echo of it boomed back at us from the distant corners of the great hall.

"This way."

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He led in a crab gait that looked awkward but was surprisingly fast. I had to stretch to keep up with him. After the first shock wore off, he amused me. It was appropriate, somehow, to find a miniature Quasimodo in a miniature castle.

The hunchback opened another set of doors. These led into a library where Simha Barnard waited for me before the empty fireplace. It was then, seeing her in the light in a dress-length dashika, that I recognized her. Dr. Simha Barnard was one of the world's best and most famous cosmetisculpture surgeons. It was she who had made so many of the Beautiful People exactly what they were and kept them that way.

She stood tall and proud, like the aristocratic Maasai warriors of her ancestry, with skin like black velvet and hair cropped to a short skullcap. Her eyes were not Maasai, though, and I wondered what other blood she carried. They glowed tawny as a panther's in the darkness of her face.

She held out her hand. "I see by your expression you know me, but please don't call me 'doctor.' I'm on holiday.

I smiled. "I understand. This is an honor Miss Barnard."

"Simha, please. It seems to be a surprise, too, though I don't know why. Does one find anything *but* celebrities in Aventine?" She raised her brows. "Well, what would you like to do to become acquainted?"

The flutes and drums still resonated through the castle. The hunchbacked dwarf remained standing in the doorway. He made no move to leave and Simha showed no signs of dismissing him. I did not feel like starting an intimate chat under the gaze of those offset eyes.

"I don't want to impose on you too long at this time of night," I said. "Why don't you come for dinner tomorrow evening?"

She smiled. Her tawny eyes focused past me on the hunchback. "Thank you, but this is a rather large household. I couldn't impose all of us on you, and it would be impolite for me to go without them. I have a better idea. Why don't you come here? Mr. Gordon said you have a sister. I believe I saw her peering through the hedge at us earlier. Why don't you bring her, too?"

I blinked. "Dee? But she never goes out."

Simha's brows rose. "Why not?"

"She feels too self-conscious. Her face would crack a mirror, our mother always used to say."

The tawny eyes narrowed. "Did she." Her voice was thoughtful. "Did you ever consider cosmetisculpture for her?"

"Once, but I understand the surgeon said her bone structure would require extensive work to begin with. That was more than our parents could afford."

"I see." She smiled. "Next to Petit

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here, any woman can feel like a fashion model, so bring your sister. I insist on it. Come at seven and don't worry about dressing; we're very informal."

I did not relish having a meal with the hunchback grinning at me and Dee trying to keep her head down so no one would see her face, but I did want to know Simha Barnard better. "That will be fine."

The hunchback showed me out.

Dee was horrified when I told her about the invitation. "How could you accept for me? I won't go! I can't sit there with that woman. She looks like a queen. I'm—"

"There's nothing wrong with you! There are much uglier people than you walking around in the streets every day. Dr. Barnard has asked you to dinner and you're going."

It was not settled quite that easily, of course. I had to tell her about the hunchback and rant histrionically about having promised our mother I would look after Dee. In the end, though, her resistance crumbled, and the next evening I was able to drag her through the hedge and across the lawn to the castle with only an occasional whimpered, "Please, Jase," as she trailed after me.

I pretended not to hear. It had been a good day. Not only had I finished programming the computer with the opening scene and all the biographical data on my novel's characters, but the computer had already finished the first chapter that afternoon. Now I was about to enjoy an evening of the company of a beautiful woman.

Inside the portcullis, I pulled at the bell.

The hunchback opened the door. With his high eye aimed at our heads while the low one focused about our knees, his diagonal smile looked like a leer. "Welcome."

Dee started to back away. I caught her wrist and pulled her in after me.

"Everyone has been looking forward all day to meeting you," the hunchback said.

The "everyone" he referred to were at the far end of the great hall. At first I thought they were dressed up as they had been the night before, but as I neared them I realized with a start that they were wearing no costumes. The odd shapes were their own.

They turned, a dozen of them, no two alike, bodies shrunken or twisted, limbs distorted, skins piebald like a horse's or striped like a tiger's. One man had the burly shoulders and heavy, bossed head of a minotaur. A woman sprouted a crest of feathers. Another had the scaled, patterned skin of a reptile. A man with sleek green skin bore ears spreading out from the sides of his head like great wings. A dozen pairs of eyes in a dozen bizarre faces fastened on us, gleaming with curiosity and what looked like anticipation.

Simha Barnard rose from the middle of the goblin pack, an ebony god-

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dess draped in clinging gold velvet. "How good of you to be prompt." Her tawny panther's eyes jumped to Dee. "This is your sister? Welcome, Dee. Surely that's a diminutive, but for what...Deanna?"

Dee looked up, then swiftly back at her toes. "No."

I answered for her. "Her name is Dulcinea."

Simha's brows rose. "How lovely. Dulcinea...the ideal of womanhood."

Behind her, the goblin pack nudged each other and grinned.

"Our mother was a romantic."

Dee said bitterly, not looking up, "She thought I was going to look like her."

Simha regarded Dee intensely. "How fortunate for you you're not like her."

I blinked and even Dee looked up at that, but before I could ask her the meaning of her strange comment, Simha was swinging with regal grace to the pack behind her. "Let me introduce my friends." She named them, pointing to each in turn: "Balmon, Abrasax, Istas, Kantu." I recalled last night's remark about neopagans and wondered if it might not be true after all. "Tree, Seer, Verdis...Feather, Jett, Guran, Nimbus...Teviva."

From a side doorway, the hunchback dwarf said, "Dinner is ready."

Simha stepped between Dee and me. She tucked a hand around my arm and took Dee's hand. "Shall we go in?"

Simha sat at the head of the long table with one of us on each side of her. The others spread down toward the hunchback seated at the far end. I found myself next to the snake-skinned woman Istas. The minotaur, Balmon, sat down beside Dee. She slid to the far side of her chair, pulling the arm nearest him tightly against her body, so there would be no chance of touching him. From the corner of my eye, I saw Simha's tawny eyes notice and rest thoughtfully on Dee.

I wondered who was going to serve the dinner. I had seen no servants but the hunchback. I found out quickly enough. The goblin pack was its own servants. They took turns waiting on each other. It was democratic but the result was an endless shuffle to and from the kitchen and a clatter of plates and cutlery accompanied by at least half a dozen simultaneous conversations.

Simha appeared undisturbed by the noise, even when the hunchback stumbled and dropped an entire pile of the pewter plates. She merely waited for the ringing of the crash to die away, then resumed talking. From time to time she glanced at Dee, and sometimes directed a remark toward her, but all Dee's attention was on her plate. She neither looked up nor reacted except to flinch at an occasional particularly loud sound or laugh.

I sighed. I had been afraid she would behave this way. I should never have agreed to bring her. To divert Simha's attention, I asked, "How did

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you happen to become a surgeon?"

"I wanted to be a sculptor, to create beauty, but none of the usual media satisfied me. They all seemed too static."

"Even tropic sculpture?"

She nodded. "Even tropes. Then one day I heard a woman talking about having cosmetisculpture and suddenly I realized that flesh is the only truly dynamic medium." She looked down at her hands. The long ebony fingers were curled as though grasping a scalpel and osteotome. "So I enrolled in medical school."

"You're creating plenty of beauty now. Judging by the recent pictures of the new Melicenda Hearst, she's a masterpiece."

The words fell into one of those unaccountable lulls in conversation. Along the table, heads turned toward us.

Simha did not respond for a minute; then her nostrils flared and her lip curled. "Hearst is hardly a masterpiece. She doesn't even rate a minor work. She's just a potboiler."

I blinked. "But she's now considered one of the world's most beautiful women."

Simha's head tossed. "Since when is a mass-produced product beauty? Hearst and the rest of her set are no better than plastic mannequins. Not one of them has ever come to me and asked to be made beautiful. No, they only want me to make them look like Lillith Mannors or Justine Carr, or if the patient is a man, like Eric Wayne. They're content to be copies!" Her tawny eyes flashed in scorn. "They're like all these computer-written novels, technically perfect but soulless, made to formula, every one exactly like the one before it."

The pack grinned. A man with piebald skin chuckled.

I felt the heat of a flush crawl up my neck. "Everyone uses computers to write these days. The critics think very highly of my work."

Her brows rose. "Those same critics also give awards to paintings by chimpanzees."

My mouth tightened. I felt thirteen pairs of glittering eyes burning into me. "Very well, then, what *do* you consider beautiful?"

"The rare, the unique." Her tawny eyes traveled the length of the table. "These."

I strained to keep myself from staring at the goblin pack. *These?* I was horrified—and speechless. What could I say in reply without sounding offensive?

Simha did not wait for a reply. "Each is unique...one of a kind. Like gems that are valued for their rarity, Jason and Dulcinea, I give you a gallery of the rarest of them all, collected works and original masterpieces."

Dee lifted her head to follow Simha's gaze incredulously.

Original masterpieces? I slid a covert glance at the minotaur and snake-

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skinned woman. Surely Simha could not mean what she sounded like. How could someone who created the face Melicenda Hearst wore reverse herself and turn another human being into one of these monstrosities?

Simha lifted brows at me. "I suppose you think they're grotesque?"

I flushed again. I wished she would not talk like this about them in front of them. They were watching us with animal intensity.

She smiled back at them. "As though grotesque were something shameful. It isn't, you know. Like love and hate, the extremes of beauty are simply different sides of the same coin, not opposites. The truly grotesque transcends mere ugliness to become sublime."

The pack aplauded.

I become aware that Dee was staring at Simha. The black woman turned with panther grace to smile back, and, for once, Dee did not look away.

The meal ended. As the minotaur and the man with piebald skin picked up the dishes, Simha said, "Istas and Feather have planned some kind of entertainment. Will you stay for it?"

Her remarks about computer-written novels rankled. I shook my head. "We can't tonight. I have some work to do."

"What a pity. Feather's productions are always so original. Perhaps Dulcinea would like to stay even though you can't." She lifted an inquiring brow at Dee.

Dee looked at me.

"I'm afraid not," I said.

The tawny eyes hooded. "Another time, perhaps. Good night, then. It's been a pleasure to meet you, Dulcinea."

The hunchback showed us to the door. The night air felt cool and blessedly clean. I filled my lungs with it. The door closed with a hollow boom and inside a flute began to play. I did not stop walking until we had reached the terrace of our villa, as though it were a sanctuary and we could not safely look back until we were on it. Lights were going on all over the castle.

"That's one invitation I'm sorry I accepted."

Shadows swept back and forth across the windows high in one tower. The flute was joined by drums again. This time I could hear the heartbeat of Simha Barnard's tribal forefathers in it. The shadows in the tower stretched and distorted as they crossed the lights inside, even more inhuman than the people casting them.

"I wonder what the Radleighs would think if they knew their home had become Pandemonium for the summer." They would no doubt think it was kinky fun. I sighed. "I've had enough of the demonfolk for one night." I started for my study, then stopped. Dee was still looking at the castle. "Dee, are you coming in?"

"Soon."

It was at least an hour, however,

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and when she did finally come in, her homely face carried a faraway look.

The next morning I found her on the terrace twice, staring next door. The first time there was no sign of activity. The castle could have been deserted. The second time most of the outré household were by the cliffs, laughing and talking while they sunned themselves on the grass...looking for all the world like a flight of demons straight out of Medieval art. Two had descended the spidery stairs down the cliff and were perched on the rocks below, dangling bare toes in the Lunamere.

"What are you doing, Dee?"

She shrugged.

Someone called my name. I looked around to see Simha coming through the hedge and across the lawn toward us, wearing only a loincloth. She moved with unself-conscious ease. Putting a hand on the terrace railing, she vaulted it gracefully as a gazelle. "Good morning, Jason...Dulcinea. I owe you an apology for my remarks about computer novels last night. It was shamefully rude of me when you were my guest. I hope you'll forgive me."

Her words still rankled, but I have never been able to resist a beautiful woman. Standing there tall and regal, her skin gleaming in the sunlight, Simha Barnard was breathtaking. "Of course," I said, and added gallantly, "I should learn not to be so thin-skinned. How was the entertainment?"

On the castle lawn, the feather-crested woman shrieked in laughter.

Simha glanced her direction, then back at me and blinked slowly, like a cat. "Oh, quite...creative. How is your novel coming?"

"Very well."

In my study, the computer chimed. "There's the end of chapter five." I started for the doors. "I need to edit now."

Simha nodded goodbye.

I slid the study door closed behind me and scooped the printout from the rack. As I went through it, I could hear snatches of voices from the terrace, Simha's like rich music, my sister's thin and reedy. Once I glanced out to see them standing together by the railing, looking down over the Lunamere, the dark velvet head bent toward the pale one. She was gone, however, by the time I finished editing and came out for lunch.

The lawn next door was also empty. I glanced toward the castle. "What did you two find to talk about for so long?"

Dee looked up at the peevish tone in my voice, then bent over her plate again. She shrugged. "Just places she's been...people she's known."

It sounded innocent enough. So why did I feel a cool wave, as though a cloud had slid over the sun?

Simha became a regular visitor. Every day she slipped through the hedge and onto the villa's terrace at least once. At first she came alone.

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Later one or two of the goblin pack accompanied her each time. She was always so charming I forgave her for bringing her menagerie. She told delightful anecdotes about her travels and acquaintances, but while I was included in the conversation if I were there, her eyes were always moving beyond me to Dee. After Dee started going next door as often as Simha came over, it was painfully obvious that Simha did not care whether I was around or not. She was interested in Dee, not me.

That was hard to accept, that she wanted the company of a silent, shrinking creature like my sister. Dee was only homely, not a freak. What about her was there to interest our odd neighbor?

"Are you enjoying the circus?" I asked Dee as she came back one afternoon.

She bit her lip. "Once you get used to them they don't look so terrible. You should come with me once in a while."

"I'm trying to finish my novel."

Her eyes widened in surprise and a kind of wondering delight. I winced. Even as I had said it I realized the remark rang with the jealous overtones of a bruised ego, and Dee had heard.

I began to avoid the terrace when Simha was there. It was almost a relief when my agent called.

Leo Carakosta's voice came over the phone line from New York with even more than its usual brisk enthusiasm. "I have a couple of autograph sessions set up to kick off the publication promotion of *The Days Like Sand*. Of course, it means you have to come out of your hole out there for a week. How close are you to finishing the new one?"

"I'm editing the last chapter now. I can have a final copy printed out by tonight. When do you want me there?"

There was a pause. I could picture him staring at the receiver in his hand, wondering that I agreed without even one argument. "Can you possibly catch a plane tomorrow?"

"I'll bring the new manuscript with me."

I hung up and went back to work with a passion. Editing was finished by midafternoon, and by dinner the computer had printed out the complete revised manuscript. Dee came in to find me boxing the printout.

"If you're going over to Gateside tomorrow to mail it, will you run some errands for me?" she asked.

I told her about Leo's call.

Her eyes widened. "And you're going?"

"Is that so surprising? I've had autograph sessions before. I've even taken speaking tours. Come see me off at the jetport and you can run your errands yourself."

Her chin ducked. She stared at her feet. "You know I can't do that, Jase," she whispered.

"Well, you'll have to send Krista, then." I paused, then went on. "Don't

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socialize so much while I'm gone that you make her do all the housework by herself."

She tucked her chin tighter. "No, Jase."

The next morning I caught the first cabletrain for Gateside. The morning was clear and sunny, making a spectacular hour's ride suspended above the sheer mountainsides, but my mind kept sliding back to Simha Barnard. What *could* she want with Dee? Maybe I should not be leaving. On the other hand, it was for just a week. What could happen in a week?

Leo met me at the airport in New York and gave me the itinerary as we rode downtown. There were more than a "few" autograph sessions. He had ten of them arranged in five cities in as many days. Once the new manuscript had been delivered to my publisher, I became too busy to even think about my sister, let alone speculate what she was doing with our neighbor. I signed books in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, the Pueblo-Denver-Cheyenne strip, and Las Frisco, though the only reason I knew they were different cities was because of the jet rides between. For the rest, the bookstores looked alike, and there was the same blur of faces beyond out-thrust copies of *The Days Like Sand*. My hand wrote automatically: "To Evelyn, to John, to Cassia, best wishes, best ever, Jason Ward," with the "J" large and elaborate, its crossed top sweeping on to become the "W." I smiled until the rictus felt permanent. "Thank you. I'm so glad you came. Yes, this is a lovely city. Thank you for coming. I'm so glad to be here. Thank you. Who would you like it signed to? Thank you. It was a very nice session. Will someone get me some coffee, please? Thank you."

Then, as the last session in Las Frisco was ending, I recognized a face...gossip columnist Marion Danforth, wearing an impeccable Gucci suit and a sly smile. "My congratulations to your computer. It followed the formula for an adventure plot perfectly. The masses will love it. Tell me, so I can pass it on to my readers, who are always eager for tidbits about celebrities, how do you find the world outside your mountain hideaway?"

I tried to match his smile as I signed the book and reached for another. "I take the cabletrain to Gateside and board a plane. The pilot knows the way."

His smile only became more predatory. "I'm surprised you left home. I understand you have a beautiful new neighbor. You mean you aren't joining the good doctor's gallery?"

I signed another book and returned it without giving conscious thought to the action. "I'm no Adonis, but I'm not nearly ugly enough to be a candidate for her collection."

"Ah, but she always needs raw material."

I stopped in midsignature to stare

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at him. "Raw material?"

"Of course." Every syllable dripped malicious delight. "She doesn't carve her monsters from wood, you know."

The words clanged in my head. I scribbled my name in the last copies and pushed away from the table to hunt Leo. "I want to go home now."

Leo nodded, smiling. "Your flight leaves at ten tomorrow."

"I'm going *tonight*, on the first plane I can catch! Get me a cab!"

I left him standing open-mouthed.

I was back in Gateside barely in time for the last cabletrain of the evening. My runabout was where I had left it at the station. I jerked the plug out of the charger and vaulted into the cockpit. Tires clawing at the paving, I gunned it out Callisto Avenue toward home.

The villa was locked and dark. Next door, the castle showed a scattering of lights on its upper floor, but nothing inside was moving visibly. There were no flutes or drums and nothing moved on the battlements.

I let myself into the villa with my key. "Dee!" The carpets and drapes swallowed the sound of my call.

I headed for her room but was not surprised to find it empty. She was probably next-door. I had turned to leave when I noticed the closet door standing partially open.

Almost reflexively, I pushed it closed...then stopped cold. There was something odd in the closing sound of the door, an unaccustomed hollowness. I jerked the door open again.

The closet was empty! I sucked on my lower lip. No wonder it had sounded hollow.

I spun and reached for the chest of drawers. One after another, I pulled out the drawers. They were empty, too. The cabinet in Dee's bathroom was also cleaned out, and the bedside tables.

I called Krista. "Where's my sister?"

At the other end of the line, Krista's voice was nervous. "Three days ago some of those...people next-door came and packed her things. They said she was moving in with them."

"*They* said? My sister didn't tell you?"

"No. I never saw Miss Ward at all."

I hung up, cursing myself for having left Aventine. I peered around the drapes of a window at the castle. I should have suspected something like this might happen. Now Dee was trapped over there, brainwashed or a prisoner. I had to find her and get her out before Simha turned her into another member of the goblin pack. How did I go about locating and freeing her, though? It might be a small castle, but compared to my villa, the building was very large. It would be full of people, too.

I pressed my thumbs to my temples, straining to think of a way to get in. There was something tickling my mind. Ah, yes. Just before I left, a landscape service from Gateside had

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begun trimming trees and sculpturing hedges in the maze. They had brought a lot of equipment the first day and left it because hauling it back and forth on the cabletrain every day was too much trouble. If I could judge by previous times landscape work had been done on the castle grounds, it would not be finished yet. That meant the equipment should still be here.

I slipped outside and through the hedge, then across the castle lawn, around the other side of the building toward the maze. The castle loomed against the sky above me, blotting out the stars. I found myself glancing repeatedly at the battlements. I was afraid I would see demon eyes suddenly glowing there, or a horned head silhouetted against the stars, or hear a shout of challenge as I was spied.

There was nothing, though. All that was on the battlements was the waning moon, touching the top of a tower like some slender sickle of bird perching there. The air carried only the fresh scent of mountain pine, the sound of birch leaves rattling like rain in the night breeze, and a woman's voice singing sweet and clear.

I found the landscapers' trailer. It was locked but a long ladder lay on the ground beside it. I picked up the ladder and swung to regard the castle speculatively. Where would they have put her? Surely not on the side near my villa.

I carried the ladder over to the castle and leaned it against the side next to the first window on the upper floor. I started to climb. The ladder shifted, scraping across the stone. I froze. What seemed like an eternity passed but no heads appeared against the sky overhead. No voices shouted.

I climbed on up until I could see in the window. The room was dark. I could not see details but it appeared empty. I went back down and moved the ladder to the next window.

The room was occupied by a woman whose skin bore tiger-striped fur the texture of velvet. She sang as she combed her striped mane before the mirror. I recognized her voice as the one I heard while crossing the lawn.

The next two rooms were dark; then the fifth held the minotaur and the green-skinned man. They were talking. I could not hear what they were saying, but at intervals the minotaur laughed in a window-rattling bellow.

Dee was in the sixth room. She sat on the edge of a huge bed, clutching her robe about her, eyes fixed in a glazed stare. I tried the window. It was unlocked and swung soundlessly inward at a touch. I slid through into the room.

I whispered, "Dee."

She started, gasping, and whirled. "Jase!"

I put my finger to my lips. "Shhh. I've come to take you home. There's a ladder by the window. If you're quiet, they'll never know you've left."

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She frowned. "Why should I leave?" She made no attempt to keep her voice down.

I sighed. I listened for any sounds that might indicate some of them were coming. "Dee—"

"Dulcinea, Jase. My name is Dulcinea and I want to be called that."

I wished desperately she would use a lower tone. She never spoke this loud at home. "I know Simha must seem like a person with an exciting, romantic life, and an ordinary person can feel ...anonymous in this menagerie that lives with her, but don't you see that by joining them, you become just part of the sideshow? There isn't another normal person among them. Stay, and Simha will ask you to let her turn you into something just as bizarre as the rest."

Dee lifted her chin. "She didn't have to ask. I asked *her*. She's going to give me wings, Jase. I won't be able to fly, of course, but it'll look as though I can." She spread her arms, holding the edges of her robe, and danced across the room with the flaps wide. "I'm going to be beautiful."

I felt ill. "You'll be a freak. Dee, please—"

She whirled on me. "Dulcinea!"

I could not say it. The name was like calling granite a diamond. "Stop this madness and come home. It isn't really better to rule in hell than serve in heaven."

"Oh, is that what home is...heaven? I don't like being forever reminded that I'm the woman whose face breaks mirrors."

I scowled. "I've tried to tell you you're as good as anyone else. I've tried to get you out in the world."

"Not seriously you haven't. You're just interested in keeping me as your housekeeper."

"That's nonsense." My voice was rising in exasperation. I forced the tone lower. "I'm your brother. I want to take care of you."

Her laugh was short and bitter. "You're my brother, but the other doesn't necessarily follow. I don't think you care anything at all about me. I think you're really indifferent. Simha isn't indifferent."

"Simha only wants to add you to her collection."

She shook her head. "You don't know her at all, but even if that were true, it would be caring. It would be enough."

I reached for her. "Come home. You'll see things more realistically there."

Dee screamed. It bounced around the room, echoing off the walls, loud and shrill.

"Dee, for god's sake—"

The door burst open. I found myself surrounded by goblins with flashing, angry eyes and hard-grasping fingers.

"He's trying to take me away," Dee cried.

I was dragged out of the room onto the gallery and down the stairs into the

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great hall. Other goblin faces stared up at us from below, and one pair of tawny panther's eyes, too. Dee hurled herself at Simha Barnard.

Simha's eyes burned into me. "You're trespassing, Jason. Get out."

"I've come to take my sister home." I tried to shake off the hands holding me but they were too strong.

"You're not *taking* anyone anywhere, Jason. Dulcinea is free to live anywhere she wishes." Dee was sobbing. Simha stroked her hair. "Anywhere you wish, pet. You're free to become whatever you like." The tawny eyes met mine. "We'll protect you from him." To me she said, "You can give up the burden your mother placed on you. We'll take care of Dulcinea, now, as we all take care of each other. Let him go."

The hands released me. I rubbed my numb wrists. "But I'm her brother!"

"But we appreciate her. Goodbye, Jason."

The goblin faces turned toward me: twisted, green, striped, piebald, snake-skinned, furred. Goblin eyes fixed intently on me.

"You can't—"

Thirteen goblin bodies stepped toward me, casting warped shadows on the flagstones of the great hall. I retreated a step.

"Open the door for him, Istas."

The snake-skinned woman ran to do so.

"Dee—" I began.

"Goodbye, Mr. Ward!"

At the door I looked back one last time. Simha still stood with her arm around Dee. The goblin pack clustered about them. Dee was no longer crying. Her face looked almost radiant.

The door boomed shut between us.

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The two earlier stories about Roland and his search for The Dark Tower are "The Gunslinger," October 1978 and "The Way Station," April 1980. We promise a much shorter wait for the fourth story, "The Slow Mutants," which is already in hand. Mr. King's latest novel is FIRESTARTER (Viking).

The Oracle and the Mountains

BY
STEPHEN KING

SYNOPSIS: This is the third tale of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his quest for The Dark Tower which stands at the root of time.

Time is the problem; the dark days have come and the world has moved on. Demons haunt the dark and monsters walk in empty places. The time of light and knowledge has passed, and only remnants—and revenants—remain.

Against this twilit landscape, the gunslinger pursues the man in black into the desert, leaving behind the town of Tull, where the man he pursues—if he is a man—set him a snare. The man in black reanimated the corpse of a weed-eater and set in motion a chain of events that ended with Roland gunning down every living soul in Tull.

Following the ashes of days-old fires, the gunslinger pursues the man in black. Three-quarters of the way across the desert he comes upon the husk of a way station that served the stage-lines years (or centuries, or milennia) ago.

Yet there is life here; not the man in black but a puzzling young boy named Jake, who has no understanding of how he came to be there. The gunslinger hypnotizes the boy and hears a puzzling, disquieting tale: Jake remembers a great city whose harbor is guarded by "a lady with a torch;" He remembers going to a private school and wearing a tie; he remembers yellow vehicles that pedestrians could hire.

And he remembers being killed.

Pushed from behind in front of an oncoming vehicle (called a "Cadillac"), Jake was run over. Who pushed him?

It was the man in black, he says.

There is water enough at the way station for two pilgrims to continue onward, across the rest of the desert to the foothills...and the mountains beyond. And in the cellar of the way station, Roland discovers a Speaking Demon in the wall which tells him: "Go slow, gunslinger. Go slow past the Drawers. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

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According to the old ways, a Speaking Demon may only speak through the mouth of a corpse; reaching into the wall, Roland discovers a jawbone which he takes with him.

As Jake and the gunslinger continue toward the mountains, the campfire remnants of the man in black grow fresher. And as Jake sleeps, the gunslinger works laboriously over the figures in his own past: Gabrielle, his mother...Marten, the sorcerer-physician who may have been the half-brother of the man in black...Roland, his father...Cort, his teacher...Cuthbert, his friend.... and David, the falcon, "God's gunslinger."

He remembers the death of a traitor, the cook Hax, by hanging...and how he and Cuthbert broke bread beneath the hanged man's feet as an offering to the rooks. He remembers "the good man," in whose service Hax died, "the good man" who has ushered in this new dark age. The good man. Marten. His mother's lover...and the man in black?

As Jake and the gunslinger reach the first hilly upswells marking the far edge of the desert, the boy points upward and, far above and miles beyond, the gunslinger sees the man in black, climbing up and up toward what the gunslinger feels may be another killing-ground.

The man in black has set him snares before on this terrible progress toward the Tower.

Roland fears the boy Jake may be another—and Roland has come to love him.

The boy found the oracle, and it almost destroyed him.

Some thin instinct brought the gunslinger up from sleep to the velvet darkness, which had fallen on them at dusk like a shroud of well water. That had been when he and Jake reached the grassy, nearly level oasis above the first rise of tumbled foothills. Even on the hardscrabble below, where they had toiled and fought for every foot in the killer sun, they had been able to hear the sound of crickets rubbing their legs seductively together in the perpetual green of the willow groves above them. The gunslinger remained calm in his mind, and the boy had kept up at least the pretense of a facade, and that had made the gunslinger proud. But Jake hadn't been able to hide the wildness in his eyes, which were white and starey, the eyes of a horse scenting water and held back from bolting only by the tenuous chain of its master's mind; like a horse at the point where only understanding, not the spur, could hold it steady. The gunslinger could gauge the need in Jake by the madness the sound of the crickets bred in his own body. His arms seemed to seek out shale to scrape on, and his knees seemed to beg to be ripped in tiny, maddening, salty gashes.

The sun trampled down on them all the way; even when it turned a swollen, feverish red with sunset, it shone perversely through the knife-cut in the hills off to their left, blinding them and making every teardrop of sweat into a prism of pain.

Then there was grass: at first only yellow scrub, clinging to the bleak soil

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where the last of the runoff reached with gruesome vitality. Further up there was witchgrass, sparse, then green and rank...then the first sweet smell of real grass, mixed with timothy and shaded by the first of the dwarfed firs. There the gunslinger saw an arc of brown movement in the shadows. He drew, fired, and felled the rabbit all before Jake could begin to cry out his surprise. A moment later he had reholstered the gun.

"Here," the gunslinger said. Up ahead the grass deepened into a jungle of green willows that was shocking—somehow indecent—after the parched sterility of the endless hardpan. There would be a spring, perhaps several of them, and it would be even cooler, but it was better out here in the open. The boy had pushed every step he could push, and there might be sucker-bats in the deeper shadows of the grove. The bats might break the boy's sleep, no matter how deep it was, and if they were vampires, neither of them might awaken...at least, not in this world.

The boy said, "I'll get some wood."

The gunslinger smiled. "No, you won't. Sit yourself, Jake." Whose phrase had that been? Some woman.

The boy sat. When the gunslinger got back, Jake was asleep in the grass. A large praying mantis was performing ablutions on the springy stem of Jake's cowlick. The gunslinger set the fire and went after water.

The willow jungle was deeper than he had suspected, and confusing in the failing light. But he found a spring, richly guarded by frogs and peepers. He filled one of their waterskins...and paused. The sounds that filled the night awoke an uneasy sensuality in him, a feeling that not even Allie, the woman he had bedded with in Tull, had been able to bring to the fore. Sensuality and fucking are, after all, cousins of the most tenuous relation. He chalked it up to the sudden blinding change from the desert. The softness of the dark seemed nearly decadent.

He returned to the camp and skinned the rabbit while water boiled over the fire. Mixed with the last of their canned food, the rabbit made an excellent stew. He woke Jake and watched him as he ate, bleary but ravenous.

"We stay here tomorrow," the gunslinger said.

"But that man you're after...that priest."

"He's no priest. And don't worry. We've got him."

"How do you know that?"

The gunslinger could only shake his head. The knowledge was strong in him...but it was not a good knowledge.

After the meal, he rinsed the cans they had eaten from (marveling again at his own water extravagance), and when he turned around, Jake was asleep again. The gunslinger felt the now-familiar rising and falling in his chest that he could only identify with Cuthbert. Cuthbert had been Roland's

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own age, but he had seemed so much younger.

His cigarette drooped toward the grass, and he tossed it into the fire. He looked at it, the clear yellow burn so different, so much cleaner, from the way the devil-grass burned. The air was wonderfully cool, and he lay down with his back to the fire. Far away, through the gash that led the way into the mountains, he heard the thick mouth of the perpetual thunder. He slept. And dreamed.

Susan, his beloved, was dying before his eyes:

As he watched, his arms held by two villagers on each side, his neck dog-caught in a huge, rusty iron collar, she was dying. Even through the thick stench of the fire Roland could smell the dankness of the pits...and he could see the color of his own madness. Susan, lovely girl at the window, horse-drover's daughter. She was turning black in the flames, her skin cracking open.

"The boy!" She was screaming. "Roland, the boy!"

He whirled, pulling his captors with him. The collar ripped at his neck and he heard the hitching, strangled sounds that were coming from his own throat. There was a sickish-sweet smell of barbecueing meat on the air.

The boy was looking down at him from a window high above the courtyard, the same window where Susan, who had taught him to be a man, had once sat and sung the old songs: "Hey Jude" and "Ease on Down the Road" and "A Hundred Leagues to Banberry Cross." He looked out from the window like the statue of an alabaster saint in a cathedral. His eyes were marble. A spike had been driven through Jake's forehead.

The gunslinger felt the strangling, ripping scream that signaled the beginning of his lunacy pull up from the root of his belly.

"Nnnnnnnnnnn—"

Roland grunted a cry as he felt the fire singe him. He sat bolt upright in the dark, still feeling the dream around him, strangling him like the collar he had worn. In his twistings and turnings he had thrown one hand against the dying coals of the fire. He put the hand to his face, feeling the dream flee, leaving only the stark picture of Jake, plaster-white, a saint for demons.

"Nnnnnnnnnn—"

He glared around at the mystic darkness of the willow grove, both guns out and ready. His eyes were red loopholes in the last glow from the fire.

"Nnnnnn-nnn—"

Jake.

The gunslinger was up and on the run. A bitter circle of moon had risen and he could follow the boy's track in the dew. He ducked under the first of the willows, splashed through the spring, and legged up the far bank, skidding in the dampness (even now his body could relish it). Willow withes

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slapped at his face. The trees were thicker here, the moon blotted out. Treetrunks rose in lurching shadows. The grass, now knee-high, slapped against him. Half-rotted dead branches reached for his shins, his *cojones*. He paused for a moment, lifting his head and scenting at the air. A ghost of a breeze helped him. The boy did not smell good, of course; neither of them did. The gunslinger's nostrils flared like those of an ape. The odor of sweat was faint, oily, unmistakable. He crashed over a deadfall of grass and bramble and downed branches, sprinted down a tunnel of overhanging willow and sumac. Moss struck his shoulders. Some clung in sighing gray tendrils.

He clawed through a last barricade of willows and came to a clearing that looked up at the stars and the highest peak of the range, gleaming skull-white at an impossible altitude.

There was a ring of tall, black stones which looked like some sort of surreal animal-trap in the moonlight. In the center was a table of stone...an altar. Very old, rising out of the ground on a powerful arm of basalt.

The boy stood before it, trembling back and forth. His hands shook at his sides as if infused with static electricity. The gunslinger called his name sharply, and Jake responded with that inarticulate sound of negation. The faint smear of face, almost hidden by the boy's left shoulder, looked both terrified and exalted. And there was something else.

The gunslinger stepped inside the ring and Jake screamed, recoiling and throwing up his arms. Now his face could be seen clearly, and indexed. The gunslinger saw fear and terror warring with an almost excruciating grimace of pleasure.

The gunslinger felt it touch him—the spirit of the oracle, the succubus. His loins were suddenly filled with rose light, a light that was soft yet hard. He felt his head twisting, his tongue thickening and becoming excruciatingly sensitive to even the spittle that coated it.

He did not think when he pulled the half-rotted jawbone from the pocket where he had carried it since he found it in the lair of the Speaking Demon at the way station. He did not think, but it did not frighten him to operate on pure instinct. He held the jawbone's frozen, prehistoric grin up in front of him, holding his other arm out stiffly, first and last fingers poked out in the ancient forked talisman, the ward against the evil eye.

The current of sensuality was whipped away from him like a drape.

Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger walked to him, and held the jawbone in front of Jake's warring eyes. A wet sound of agony. The boy tried to pull his gaze away, could not. And suddenly both eyes rolled up to show the whites. Jake collapsed. His body struck the earth limply, one hand almost touching the altar. The gunslinger dropped to one knee and picked

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him up. He was amazingly light, as dehydrated as a November leaf from their long walk through the desert.

Around him Roland could feel the presence that dwelt in the circle of stones, whirring with a jealous anger—its prize had been taken from it. When the gunslinger passed out of the circle, the sense of frustrated jealousy faded. He carried Jake back to their camp. By the time they got there, the boy's twitching unconsciousness had become deep sleep. The gunslinger paused for a moment above the gray ruin of the fire. The moonlight on Jake's face reminded him again of a church saint, alabaster purity all unknown. He suddenly hugged the boy, knowing that he loved him. And it seemed that he could almost feel the laughter from the man in black, someplace far above them.

Jake was calling him; that was how he awoke. He had tied the boy firmly to one of the tough bushes that grew nearby, and the boy was hungry and upset. By the sun, it was almost nine-thirty.

"Why'd you tie me up?" Jake asked indignantly as the gunslinger loosened the thick knots in the blanket. "I wasn't going to run away!"

"You did run away," the gunslinger said, and the expression on Jake's face made him smile. "I had to go out and get you. You were sleepwalking."

"I was?" Jake looked at him suspiciously.

The gunslinger nodded and suddenly produced the jawbone. He held it in front of Jake's face and Jake flinched away from it, raising his arm.

"See?"

Jake nodded, bewildered.

"I have to go off for a while now. I may be gone the whole day. So listen to me, boy. It's important. If sunset comes and I'm not back—"

Fear flashed on Jake's face. "You're leaving me!"

The gunslinger only looked at him.

"No," Jake said after a moment. "I guess you're not."

"I want you to stay right here while I'm gone. And if you feel strange—funny in any way—you pick up this bone and hold it in your hands."

Hate and disgust crossed Jake's face, mixed with bewilderment. "I couldn't. I...I just couldn't."

"You can. You may have to. Especially after midday. It's important. Dig?"

"Why do you have to go away?" Jake burst out.

"I just do."

The gunslinger caught another fascinating glimpse of the steel that lay under the boy's surface, as enigmatic as the story he had told about coming from a city where the buildings were so tall they actually scraped the sky.

"All right," Jake said.

The gunslinger laid the jawbone carefully on the ground next to the ruins of the fire, where it grinned up through the grass like some eroded

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fossil that has seen the light of day after a night of five thousand years. Jake would not look at it. His face was pale and miserable. The gunslinger wondered if it would profit them for him to put the boy to sleep and question him, but he decided there would be little if any gain. He knew well enough that the spirit of the stone circle was surely a demon, and very likely an oracle as well. A demon with no shape, only a kind of unformed sexual glare with the eye of prophecy. He wondered sardonically if it might not be the soul of Sylvia Pittston, the giant woman whose religious huckstering had led to the final showdown in Tull...but knew it was not. The stones in the circle had been ancient, this particular demon's territory staked out long before the earliest shade of prehistory. But the gunslinger knew the forms of speaking quite well and did not think the boy would have to use the jawbone mojo. The voice and mind of the oracle would be more than occupied with him. And the gunslinger needed to know things, in spite of the risk...and the risk was not negligible. For both Jake and himself, he needed desperately to know.

The gunslinger opened his tobacco poke and pawed through it, pushing the dry strands of leaf aside until he came to a minuscule object wrapped in a fragment of white paper. He hefted it in his hand, looking absently up at the sky. Then he unwrapped it and held the contents—a tiny white pill with edges that had been much worn with traveling—in his hand.

Jake looked at it curiously. "What's that?"

The gunslinger uttered a short laugh. "The philosopher's stone," he said. "The story that Cort used to tell us was that the Old Gods pissed over the desert and made mescaline."

Jake only looked puzzled.

"A drug," the gunslinger said. "But not one that puts you to sleep. One that wakes you up all the way for a little while."

"Like LSD," the boy agreed instantly and then looked puzzled.

"What's that?"

"I don't know," Jake said. "It just popped out. I think it came from...you know, before."

The gunslinger nodded, but he was doubtful. He had never heard of mescaline referred to as LSD, not even in Marten's old books.

"Will it hurt you?" Jake asked.

"It never has," the gunslinger said, conscious of the evasion.

"I don't like it."

"Never mind."

The gunslinger squatted in front of the waterskin, took a mouthful, and swallowed the pill. As always, he felt an immediate reaction in his mouth; it seemed overloaded with saliva. He sat down before the dead fire.

"When does something happen to you?" Jake asked.

"Not for a little while. Be quiet."

So Jake was quiet, watching with

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open suspicion as the gunslinger went calmly about the ritual of cleaning his guns.

He reholstered them and said, "Your shirt, Jake. Take it off and give it to me."

Jake pulled his faded shirt reluctantly over his head and gave it to the gunslinger.

The gunslinger produced a needle that had been threaded into the side-seam of his jeans, and thread from an empty cartridge-loop in his gunbelt. He began to sew up a long rip in one of the sleeves of the boy's shirt. As he finished and handed the shirt back, he felt the mesc beginning to take hold—there was a tightening in his stomach and a feeling that all the muscles in his body were being cranked up a notch.

"I have to go," he said, getting up.

The boy half rose, his face a shadow of concern, and then he settled back. "Be careful," he said. "Please."

"Remember the jawbone," the gunslinger said. He put his hand on Jake's head as he went by and touseled the corn-colored hair. The gesture startled him into a short laugh. Jake watched after him with a troubled smile until he was gone into the willow jungle.

The gunslinger walked deliberately toward the circle of stones, pausing once to get a cool drink from the spring. He could see his own reflection in a tiny pool edged with moss and lily-pads, and he looked at himself for a moment, as fascinated as Narcissus. The mind-reaction was beinning to settle in, slowing down his chain of thought by seeming to increase the connotations of every idea and every bit of sensory input. Things began to take on weight and thickness that had been heretofore invisible. He paused, getting to his feet again, and looked through the tangled snarl of willows. Sunlight slanted through in a golden, dusty bar, and he watched the interplay of motes and tiny flying things for a moment before going on.

The drug often had disturbed him: his ego was too strong (or perhaps just too simple) to enjoy being eclipsed and peeled back, made a target for more sensitive emotions—they tickled at him like a cat's whiskers. But this time he felt fairly calm. That was good.

He stepped into the clearing and walked straight into the circle. He stood, letting his mind run free. Yes, it was coming harder now, faster. The grass screamed green at him; it seemed that if he bent over and rubbed his hands in it he would stand up with green paint all over his fingers and palms. He resisted a puckish urge to try the experiment.

But there was no voice from the oracle. No sexual stirring.

He went to the altar, stood beside it for a moment. Coherent thought was now almost impossible. His teeth felt strange in his head. The world held too much light. He climbed up on the altar and lay back. His mind was becoming a jungle full of strange thought-plants

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that he had never seen or suspected before, a willow-jungle that had grown up around a mescaline spring. The sky was water and he hung suspended over it. The thought gave him a vertigo that seemed faraway and unimportant.

A line of old poetry occurred to him, not a nursery verse now, no; his mother had feared the drugs and the necessity of them (as she had feared Cort and the necessity for this beater of boys); this verse came from one of the Dens to the north of the desert, where men still lived among the machines that usually didn't work...and which sometimes ate the men when they did. The lines played again and again, reminding him (in an unconnected way that was typical of the mescaline rush) of snow falling in a globe he had owned as a child, mystic and half fantastical:

Beyond the reach of human range
A drop of hell, a touch of strange...

The trees which overhung the altar contained faces. He watched them with abstracted fascination: Here was a dragon, green and twitching. Here a wood-nymph with beckoning branch arms. Here a living skull overgrown with slime. Faces. Faces.

The grasses of the clearing suddenly whipped and bent.

I come.

I come.

Vague stirrings within his flesh. How far I have come, he thought. From couching with Susan in sweet hay to this.

She pressed over him, a body made of the wind, a breast of sudden fragrant jasmine, rose, and honeysuckle.

"Make your prophecy," he said. His mouth felt full of metal.

A sigh. A faint sound of weeping. The gunslinger's genitals felt drawn and hard. Over him and beyond the faces in the leaves, he could see the mountains—hard and brutal and full of teeth.

The body moved against him, struggled with him. He felt his hands curl into fists. She had sent him a vision of Susan. It was Susan above him, lovely Susan at the window, waiting for him with her hair spilled down her back and over her shoulders. He tossed his head, but her face followed.

Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle, old hay...the smell of love. Love me.

"Speak prophecy," he said.

Please, the oracle wept. *Don't be cold. It is always so cold here—*

Hands slipping over his flesh, manipulating, lighting him on fire. Pulling him. Drawing. A black crevice. The ultimate wanton. Wet and warm—

No. Dry. Cold. Sterile.

Have a touch of mercy, gunslinger. Ah, please, I beg your favor! Mercy!

Would you have mercy on the boy?

What boy? I know no boy. It's not boys I need. O please.

Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle. Dry hay with its ghost of summer clover. Oil decanted from ancient urns. A riot for flesh.

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"After," he said.

Now. Please. Now.

He let his mind coil out at her, the antithesis of emotion. The body that hung over him froze and seemed to scream. There was a brief, vicious tug-of-war between his temples—his mind was the rope, gray and fibrous. For long moments there was no sound but the quiet hush of his breathing and the faint breeze which made the green faces in the trees shift, wink, and grimace. No bird sang.

Her hold loosened. Again there was the sound of sobbing. It would have to be quick, or she would leave him. To stay now meant attenuation; perhaps her own kind of death. Already he felt her drawing away to leave the circle of stones. Wind rippled the grass in tortured patterns.

"Prophecy," he said—a bleak noun.

A weeping, tired sigh. He could almost have granted the mercy she begged, but—there was Jake. He would have found Jake dead or insane if he had been any later last night.

Sleep, then.

"No."

Then half-sleep.

The gunslinger turned his eyes up to the faces in the leaves. A play was being enacted there for his amusement. Worlds rose and fell before him. Empires were built across shining sands where forever machines toiled in abstract electronic frenzies. The empires declined and fell. Wheels that had spun like silent liquid moved more slowly, began to squeak, began to scream, stopped. Sand choked the stainless steel gutters of concentric streets below dark skies full of stars like beds of cold jewels. And through it all, a dying wind of change blew, bringing with it the cinnamon smell of late October. The gunslinger watched as the world moved on.

And half-slept.

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

Yes, three is mystic. Three stands at the heart of the mantra.

Which three?

'We see in part, and thus is the mirror of prophecy darkened.'

Tell me what you can.

The first is young, dark-haired. He stands on the brink of robbery and murder. A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN.

Which demon is that? I know it not, even from nursery stories.

'We see in part, and thus is the mirror of prophecy darkened.' There are other worlds, gunslinger, and other demons. These waters are deep.

The second?

She comes on wheels. Her mind is iron but her heart and eyes are soft. I see no more.

The third?

In chains.

The man in black? Where is he?

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Near. You will speak with him.

Of what will we speak?

The Tower.

The boy? Jake?

...

Tell me of the boy!

The boy is your gateway to the man in black. The man in black is your gate to the three. The three are your way to the Dark Tower.

How? How can that be? Why must it be?

'We see in part, and thus is the mirror—'

God damn you.

No god damned me.

'Each we are our own?' Don't patronize me, Thing. I'm stronger than you.

...

What do they call you, then? Star-Slut? Whore of the Winds?

Some live on love that comes to the ancient places...even in these sad and evil times. Some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, on the blood of young boys.

May he not be spared?

Yes.

How?

Cease, gunslinger. Strike your camp and turn west. In the west there is still a need for men who live by the bullet.

I am sworn by my father's guns and by the treachery of Marten.

Marten is no more. The man in black has eaten his soul. This you know.

I am sworn.

Then you are damned.

Have your way with me, bitch.

Eagerness.

The shadow swung over him, enfolded him. Suddenly ecstasy broken only by a galaxy of pain, as faint and bright as ancient stars gone red with collapse. Faces came to him unbidden at the climax of their coupling: Sylvia Pittston, Alice, the woman from Tull, Susan, Aileen, a hundred others.

And finally, after an eternity, he pushed her away from him, once again in his right mind, bone-weary and disgusted.

No! It isn't enough! It—

"Let me be," the gunslinger said. He sat up and almost fell off the altar before regaining his feet. She touched him tentatively

(honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet attar)

and he pushed her violently, falling to his knees.

He staggered up and made his drunken way to the perimeter of the circle. He staggered through, feeling a huge weight fall from his shoulders. He drew a shuddering, weeping breath. As he started away he could feel her standing at the bars of her prison, watching him go from her. He wondered how long it might be before someone else crossed the desert and found her, hungry and alone. For a moment he felt dwarfed by the possibilities of time.

* * *

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"You're sick!"

Jake stood up fast when the gunslinger shambled back through the last trees and came into camp. Jake had been huddled by the ruins of the tiny fire, the jawbone across his knees, gnawing disconsolately on the bones of the rabbit. Now he ran toward the gunslinger with a look of distress that made Roland feel the full, ugly weight of a coming betrayal—one he sensed which might only be the first of many.

"No," he said. "Not sick. Just tired. I'm whipped." He gestured absently at the jawbone. "You can throw that away."

Jake threw it quickly and violently, rubbing his hands across his shirt after doing it.

The gunslinger sat down—almost fell down—feeling the aching joints and the pummeled, thick mind that was the unlovely afterglow of mescaline. His crotch also pulsed with a dull ache. He rolled a cigarette with careful, unthinking slowness. Jake watched. The gunslinger had a sudden impulse to tell him what he had learned, then thrust the idea away with horror. He wondered if a part of him—mind or soul—might not be disintegrating.

"We sleep here tonight," the gunslinger said. "Tomorrow we climb. I'll go out a little later and see if I can't shoot something for supper. I've got to sleep now. Okay?"

"Sure."

The gunslinger nodded and lay back. When he woke up the shadows were long across the small grass clearing. "Build up the fire," he told Jake and tossed him his flint and steel. "Can you use that?"

"Yes, I think so."

The gunslinger walked toward the willow grove and then turned left, skirting it. At a place where the ground opened out and upward in heavy open grass, he stepped back into the shadows and stood silently. Faintly, clearly, he could hear the *clik-clink-clik-clink* of Jake striking sparks. He stood without moving for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Three rabbits came, and the gunslinger pulled leather. He took down the two plumpest, skinned them and gutted them, brought them back to the camp. Jake had the fire going and the water was already steaming over it.

The gunslinger nodded to him. "That's a good piece of work."

Jake flushed with pleasure and silently handed back the flint and steel.

While the stew cooked, the gunslinger used the last of the light to go back into the willow grove. Near the first pool he began to hack at the tough vines that grew near the water's marshy verge. Later, as the fire burned down to coals and Jake slept, he would plait them into ropes that might be of some limited use later. But he did not think somehow that the climb would be a particularly difficult one. He felt a sense of fate that he no longer even considered odd.

The vines bled green sap over his

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hands as he carried them back to where Jake waited.

They were up with the sun and packed in half an hour. The gunslinger hoped to shoot another rabbit in the meadow as they fed, but time was short and no rabbit showed itself. The bundle of their remaining food was now so small and light that Jake carried it easily. He had toughened up, this boy; you could see it.

The gunslinger carried their water, freshly drawn from one of the springs. He looped his three vine ropes around his belly. They gave the circle of stones a wide berth (the gunslinger was afraid the boy might feel a recurrence of fear, but when they passed above it on a stony rise, Jake only offered it a passing glance and then looked at a bird that hovered upwind). Soon enough, the trees began to lose their height and lushness. Trunks were twisted and roots seemed to struggle with the earth in a tortured hunt for moisture.

"It's all so old," Jake said glumly when they paused for a rest. "Isn't there anything young?"

The gunslinger smiled and gave Jake an elbow. "You are," he said.

"Will it be a hard climb?"

The gunslinger looked at him, curious. "The mountains are high. Don't you think it will be a hard climb?"

Jake looked back at him, his eyes clouded, puzzled. "No."

They went on.

The sun climbed to its zenith, seemed to hang there more briefly than it ever had during the desert crossing, and then passed on, giving them back their shadows. Shelves of rock protruded from the rising land like the arms of giant easychairs buried in the earth. The scrub grass turned yellow and sere. Finally they were faced with a deep, chimneylike crevasse in their path and they scaled a short, peeling rise of rock to get around and above it. The ancient granite had faulted on lines that were steplike, and as they had both intuited, the climb was an easy one. They paused on the four-foot-wide scarp at the top and looked back over the falling land to the desert, which curled around the upland like a huge yellow paw. Further off it gleamed at them in a white shield that dazzled the eye, receding into dim waves of rising heat. The gunslinger felt faintly amazed at the realization that this desert had nearly murdered him. From where they stood, in a new coolness, the desert certainly appeared momentous, but not deadly.

They turned back to the business of the climb, scrambling over jackstraw falls of rock and crouch-walking up inclined planes of stone shot with glitters of quartz and mica. The rock was pleasantly warm to the touch, but the air was definitely cooler. In the late afternoon the gunslinger heard the faint sound of thunder. The rising line of the mountains obscured the sight of the rain on the other side, however.

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When the shadows began to turn purple, they camped in the overhang of a jutting brow of rock. The gunslinger anchored their blanket above and below, fashioning a kind of shanty lean-to. They sat at the mouth of it, watching the sky spread a cloak over the world. Jake dangled his feet over the drop. The gunslinger rolled his evening smoke and eyed Jake half humorously. "Don't roll over in your sleep," he said, "or you may wake up in hell."

"I won't," Jake replied seriously. "My mother says—" He broke it off.

"She says what?"

"That I sleep like a dead man," Jake finished. He looked at the gunslinger, who saw that the boy's mouth was trembling as he strove to keep back tears—*only a boy*, he thought, and pain smote him, like the icepick that too much cold water can sometimes plant in the forehead. *Only a boy. Why?* Silly question. When a boy, wounded in body or spirit, called that question out to Cort, that ancient, scarred battle-engine whose job it was to teach the sons of gunslingers the beginning of what they had to know, Cort would answer: *Why is a crooked letter and can't be made straight... never mind why, just get up, pus-head! Get up! The day's young!*

"Why am I here?" Jake asked. "Why did I forget everything from before?"

"Because the man in black has drawn you here," the gunslinger said. "And because of the Tower. The Tower stands at a kind of...power-nexus. In time."

"I don't understand that!"

"Nor do I," the gunslinger said. "But something has been happening. Just in my own time. 'The world has moved on,' we say...we've always said. But it's moving on faster now. Something has happened to time."

They sat in silence. A breeze, faint but with an edge, picked at their legs. Somewhere it made a hollow *whooooo* in a rock fissure.

"Where do you come from?" Jake asked.

"From a place that no longer exists. Do you know the Bible?"

"Jesus and Moses. Sure."

The gunslinger smiled. "That's right. My land had a Biblical name—New Canaan, it was called. The land of milk and honey. In the Bible's Canaan, there were supposed to be grapes so big that men had to carry them on sledges. We didn't grow them that big, but it was a sweet land."

"I know about Ulysses," Jake said hesitantly. "Was he in the Bible?"

"Maybe," the gunslinger said. "The Book is lost now—all except the parts I was forced to memorize."

"But the others—"

"No others," the gunslinger said. "I'm the last."

A tiny wasted moon began to rise, casting its slitted gaze down into the tumble of rocks where they sat.

"Was it pretty? Your country... your land?"

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"It was beautiful," the gunslinger said absently. "There were fields and rivers and mists in the morning. But that's only pretty. My mother used to say that...and that the only real beauty is order and love and light."

Jake made a noncommittal noise.

The gunslinger smoked and thought of how it had been—the nights in the huge central hall, hundreds of richly clad figures moving through the slow, steady waltz steps or the faster, light ripples of the *pol-kam*, Aileen on his arm, her eyes brighter than the most precious gems, the light of the crystal-enclosed electric lights making highlights in the newly done hair of the courtesans and their half-cynical amours. The hall had been huge, an island of light whose age was beyond telling, as was the whole Central Place, which was made up of nearly a hundred stone castles. It had been twelve years since he had seen it, and leaving for the last time, Roland had ached as he turned his face away from it and began his first cast for the trail of the man in black. Even then, twelve years ago, the walls had fallen, weeds grew in the courtyards, bats roosted amongst the great beams of the central hall, and the galleries echoed with the soft swoop and whisper of swallows. The fields where Cort had taught them archery and gunnery and falconry were gone to hay and timothy and wild vines. In the huge and echoey kitchen where Hax had once held his own fuming and aromatic court, a grotesque colony of Slow Mutants nested, peering at him from the merciful darkness of pantries and shadowed pillars. The warm steam that had been filled with the pungent odors of roasting beef and pork had been transmuted to the clammy damp of moss and huge white toadstools grew in corners where not even the Slow Muties dared to encamp. The huge oak subcellar bulkhead stood open, and the most poignant smell of all had issued from that, an odor that seemed to symbolize with a flat finality all the hard facts of dissolution and decay: the high sharp odor of wine gone to vinegar. It had been no struggle to turn his face to the south and leave it behind—but it had hurt his heart.

"Was there a war?" Jake asked.

"Even better," the gunslinger said and pitched the last smoldering ember of his cigarette away. "There was a revolution. We won every battle, and lost the war. No one won the war, unless maybe it was the scavengers. There must have been rich pickings for years after."

"I wish I'd lived there," Jake said wistfully.

"It was another world," the gunslinger said. "Time to turn in."

The boy, now only a dim shadow, turned on his side and curled up with the blanket tossed loosely over him. The gunslinger sat sentinel over him for perhaps an hour after, thinking his long, sober thoughts. Such meditation was a new thing for him, novel, sweet

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in a melancholy sort of way, but still utterly without practical value: there was no solution to the problem of Jake other than the one the Oracle had offered—and that was simply not possible. There might have been tragedy in the situation, but the gunslinger did not see that; he saw only the predestination that had always been there. And, finally, his more natural character reasserted itself and he slept deeply, with no dreams.

The climb became grimmer on the following day as they continued to angle toward the narrow V of the pass through the mountains. The gunslinger pushed slowly, still with no sense of hurry. The dead stone beneath their feet left no trace of the man in black, but the gunslinger knew he had been this way before them—and not only from the path of his climb as he and Jake had observed him, tiny and buglike, from the foothills. His aroma was printed on every cold downdraft of air. It was an oily, sardonic odor, as bitter to his nose as the aroma of devil-grass.

Jake's hair had grown much longer, and it curled slightly at the base of his sunburned neck. He climbed tough, moving with sure-footedness and no apparent acrophobia as they crossed gaps or scaled their way up ledged facings. Twice already he had gone up in places the gunslinger could not have managed. Jake had anchored one of the ropes so that the gunslinger could climb up hand over hand.

The following morning they climbed through a coldly damp snatch of cloud that began blotting out the tumbled slopes below them. Patches of hard, granulated snow began to appear nestled in some of the deeper pockets of stone. It glittered like quartz and its texture was as dry as sand. That afternoon they found a single footprint in one of these snowpatches. Jake stared at it for a moment with awful fascination, then looked up frightfully, as if expecting to see the man in black materialize into his own footprint. The gunslinger tapped him on the shoulder then and pointed ahead. "Go. The day's getting old."

Later, they made camp in the last of the daylight on a wide, flat ledge to the east and north of the cut that slanted into the heart of the mountains. The air was frigid; they could see the puffs of their breath, and the humid sound of thunder in the red-and-purple afterglow of the day was surreal, slightly lunatic.

The gunslinger thought the boy might begin to question him, but there were no questions from Jake. The boy fell almost immediately into sleep. The gunslinger followed his example. He dreamed again of the dark place in the earth, the dungeon, and again of Jake as an alabaster saint with a nail through his forehead. He awoke with a gasp, instinctively reaching for the jawbone that was no longer there, expecting to feel the grass of that ancient

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grove. He felt rock instead, and the cold thinness of altitude in his lungs. Jake was asleep beside him, but his sleep was not easy: he twisted and mumbled inarticulate words to himself, chasing his own phantoms. The gunslinger laid over uneasily, and slept again.

They were another week before they reached the end of the beginning—for the gunslinger, a twisted prologue of twelve years, from the final crash of his native place and the gathering of the other three. For Jake, the gateway had been a strange death in another world. For the gunslinger it had been a stranger death yet—the endless hunt for the man in black through a world with neither map nor memory. Cuthbert and the others were gone, all of them gone: Randolph, Jamie de Curry, Aileen, Susan, Marten (yes, they had dragged him down, and there had been gunplay, and even that grape had been bitter). Until finally only three remained of the old world, three like dreadful cards from a terrible deck of tarot cards: gunslinger, man in black, and the Dark Tower.

A week after Jake saw the footstep, they faced the man in black for a brief moment of time. In that moment, the gunslinger felt he could almost understand the gravid implication of the Tower itself, for that moment seemed to stretch out forever.

They continued southwest, reaching a point perhaps halfway through the Cyclopean mountain range, and just as the going seemed about to become really difficult for the first time (above them, seeming to lean out, the icy ledges and screaming buttes made the gunslinger feel an unpleasant reverse vertigo), they began to descend again along the side of the narrow pass. An angular, zigzagging path led them toward a canyon floor where an ice-edged stream boiled with slaty, headlong power from higher country still.

On that afternoon the boy paused and looked back at the gunslinger, who had paused to wash his face in the stream.

"I smell him," Jake said.

"So do I."

Ahead of them the mountain threw up its final defense—a huge slab of insurmountable granite facing that climbed into cloudy infinity. At any moment the gunslinger expected a twist in the stream to bring them upon a high waterfall and the insurmountable smoothness of rock—dead end. But the air here had that odd magnifying quality that is common to high places, and it was another day before they reached that great granite face.

The gunslinger began to feel the dreadful tug of anticipation again, the feeling that it was all finally in his grasp. Near the end, he had to fight himself to keep from breaking into a trot.

"Wait!" The boy had stopped suddenly. They faced a sharp elbow-bend

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in the stream; it boiled and frothed with high energy around the eroded hang of a giant sandstone boulder. All that morning they had been in the shadow of the mountains as the canyon narrowed.

Jake was trembling violently and his face had gone pale.

"What's the matter?"

"Let's go back," Jake whispered. "Let's go back quick."

The gunslinger's face was wooden.

"Please?" The boy's face was drawn, and his jawline shook with suppressed agony. Through the heavy blanket of stone they still heard thunder, as steady as machines in the earth. The slice of sky they could see had itself assumed a turbulent, gothic gray above them as warm and cold currents met and warred.

"Please, *please!*" The boy raised a fist, as if to strike the gunslinger's chest.

"No."

The boy's face took on wonder. "You're going to kill me. He killed me the first time and you are going to kill me now."

The gunslinger felt the lie on his lips. He spoke it: "You'll be all right." And a greater lie. "I'll take care."

Jake's face went gray, and he said no more. He put an unwilling hand out, and he and the gunslinger went around the elbow-bend. They came face to face with that final rising wall and the man in black.

He stood no more than twenty feet above them, just to the right of the waterfall that crashed and spilled from a huge ragged hole in the rock. Unseen wind rippled and tugged at his hooded robe. He held a staff in one hand. The other hand he held out to them in a mocking gesture of welcome. He seemed a prophet, and below that rushing sky, mounted on a ledge of rock, a prophet of doom, his voice the voice of Jeremiah.

"Gunslinger! How well you fulfill the prophecies of old! Good day and good day and good day!" He laughed, the sound echoing ever over the bellow of the falling water.

Without a thought and seemingly without a click of motor relays, the gunslinger had drawn his pistols. The boy cowered to his right and behind, a small shadow.

Roland fired three times before he could gain control of his traitor hands —the echoes bounced their bronze tones against the rock valley that rose around them, over the sound of the wind and water.

A spray of granite puffed over the head of the man in black; a second to the left of his hood; a third to the right. He had missed cleanly all three times.

The man in black laughed—a full, hearty laugh that seemed to challenge the receding echo of gunshots. "Would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?"

"Come down," the gunslinger said. "Answers all around."

Again that huge, derisive laugh.

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"It's not your bullets I fear, Roland. It's your idea of answers that scares me."

"Come down."

"The other side, I think," the man in black said. "On the other side we will hold much council."

His eyes flicked to Jake and he added:

"Just the two of us."

Jake flinched away from him with a small, whining cry, and the man in black turned, his robe swirling in the gray air like a batwing. He disappeared into the cleft in the rock from which the water spewed at full force. The gunslinger exercised grim will and did not send a bullet after him—*would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?*

There was only the sound of wind and water, sounds that had been in this place of desolation for a thousand years. Yet the man in black had been here. After these twelve years, Roland had seen him close-up, spoken to him. And the man in black had laughed at him.

On the other side we will hold much council.

The boy looked up at him with dumbly submissive sheep's eyes, his body trembling. For a moment the gunslinger saw the face of Alice, the girl from Tull, superimposed over Jake's, the scar standing out on her forehead like a mute accusation, and felt brute loathing for them both (it would not occur to him until much later that both the scar on Alice's forehead and the nail he saw spiked through Jake's forehead in his dreams were in the same place). Jake seemed to catch a whiff of his thought and a moan was dragged from his throat. But it was short; he twisted his lips shut over it. He held the makings of a fine

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man, perhaps a gunslinger in his own right if given time.

Just the two of us.

The gunslinger felt a great and unholy thirst in some deep unknown pit of his body, a thirst no wine could touch. Worlds trembled, almost within reach of his fingers, and in some instinctual way he strove not to be corrupted, knowing in his colder mind that such strife was vain and always would be.

It was noon. He looked up, letting the cloudy, unsettled daylight shine for the last time on the all-too-vulnerable sun of his own righteousness. No one ever really pays for it in silver, he thought. The price of any evil—necessary or otherwise—comes due in flesh.

"Come with me or stay," the gunslinger said.

The boy only looked at him mutely. And to the gunslinger, in that final and vital moment of uncoupling from a moral principle, he ceased to be Jake and become only the boy, an impersonality to be moved and used.

Something screamed in the windy stillness; he and the boy both heard.

The gunslinger began, and after a moment Jake came after. Together they climbed the tumbled rock beside the steely-cold falls, and stood where the man in black had stood before them. And together they entered in where he had disappeared. The darkness swallowed them.

This ends the third section of The Dark Tower—the story of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his search for the Tower that stands at the root of time.

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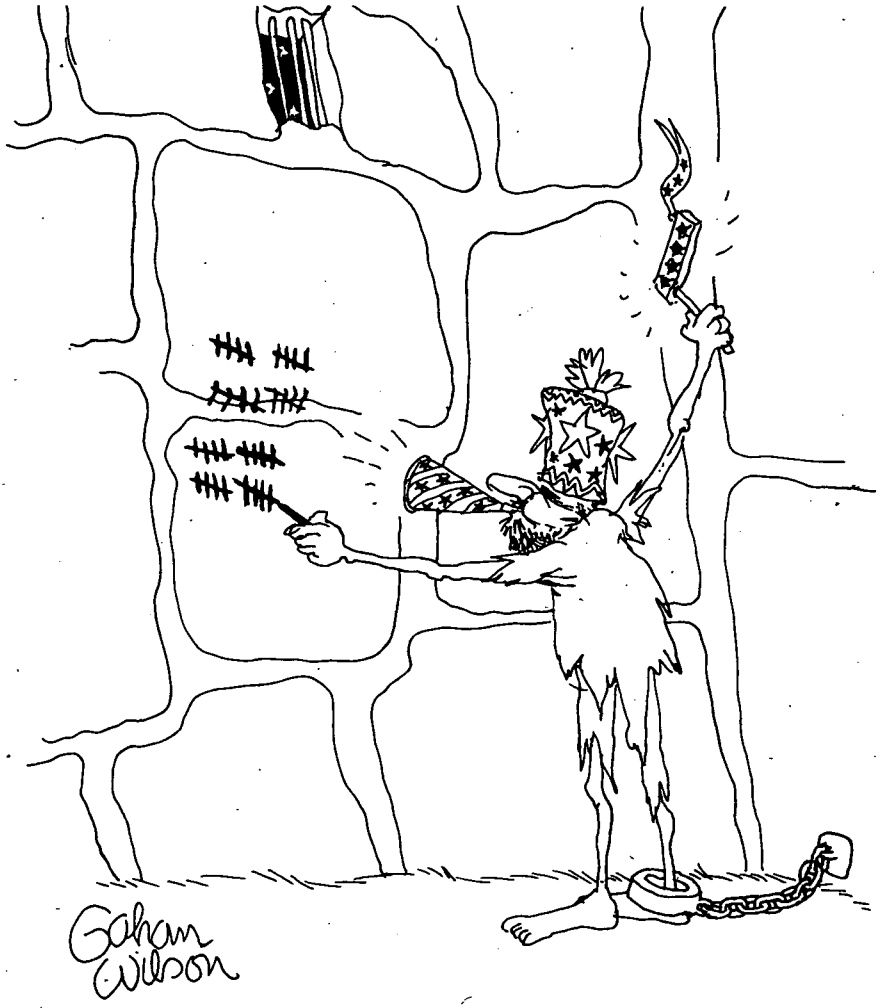

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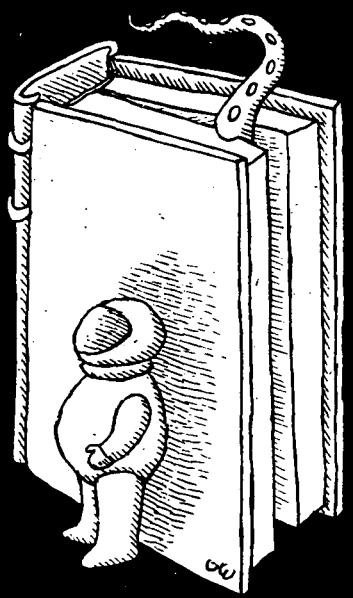

The Best Science Fiction of the Year #9, edited by Terry Carr, Ballantine Books, $2.50

Best Science Fiction Stories of the Year: Ninth Annual Collection, edited by Gardner Dozois, E.P. Dutton, $11.95

The 1980 Annual World's Best SF, edited by Donald A. Wollheim with Arthur W. Saha, Daw Books, Inc., $2.25

Timescape, by Gregory Benford, Simon and Schuster, $12.95

The annuals are out, and here, if we can trust the amalgamated wisdom of our four editors, are the thirty best stories of 1979. It is in the nature of annual reports to pose the question, *Was it a good year?* and it pains me, as both a shareholder and a consumer, to answer that for science fiction, as for so many other sectors of the economy, 1979 was not a good year.

Against such a sweeping judgment it may be countered that sf is not a unitary phenomenon nor one easily comparable to a tomato harvest. Sf is a congeries of individual writers, each producing stories of distinct and varying merit. A year of stories is as arbitrary a measure as mileage in painting. Nevertheless, that is how the matter is arranged, not only by anthologists but by those who organize the two prize-giving systems, SFWA, which awards the Nebulas, and Fandom, which gathers once a year to hand out Hugos. The overlap between the contents of the annuals and the short-lists for the prizes is so great that one may fairly surmise that something

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like cause-and-effect is at work. As the SFWA nominating procedures are conducted in plain view, it seems certain that the editors will keep their eyes open for the likeliest contenders, since the annual that most successfully second-guesses the awards nominees has a clear advantage over its rivals.

All this preamble as a caveat to those seeking a buyers' guide to the supremely best of the three annuals. Each one has its unique excellences (as well as excellences shared with a rival); each, sad to say, includes stories that would be more at home in a workshop than an anthology. What I mean to do is to lump the three annuals together and review the year 1979 in all its annualness, including the awards for short fiction.

First, some raw data. Not counting overlapping choices, there are 30 stories, by 29 writers, in the three annuals. These include all but one of the short story nominees for the Hugo and the Nebula (the omitted writer is represented by another story) and five of the ten nominees for novelette.*

A significant proportion of the authors of the nominated stories constitute a generation unto themselves. George R.R. Martin, Vonda McIntyre, Tanith Lee, Jack Dann, Ed Bryant, Michael Bishop, and John Varley were all born between 1945 and 1948 and first began publishing between two years, either way, of 1971. *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* doesn't have an entry for Orson Scott Card, a multiple nominee, so presumably he came to prominence somewhat later, but my guess, based on internal evidence, is that he would belong to this group. These eight, from a total of 29 writers, wrote something better than 40% of the total fiction wordage in the three annuals, and they have to their communal credit 17 Hugo and Nebula nominations this year. All of them (except Tanith Lee, who is English) are listed as members of SFWA. Most of them were at Noreascon Two in Boston on Labor Day this year, where I met some of them and didn't meet others.

I don't mean to suggest that anything like a cabal is at work, only that a coherent generational grouping exists, such as the groupings Malcolm Cowley speaks of in his essay, "And Jesse Begat."* Further, I'd suggest that these writers have more in common *as a group* than those (myself among them) who were lumped together under the rubric "New Wave," that they possess something approaching solidarity, as the Futurians did in their day. The relative strength of their

On a statistical basis the Wollheim/Saha anthology did best at anticipating short-listed stories: eight of its 11 stories were on one or other ballot. Dozois scored six out of 11; Carr only three out of 14, but this neglects a companion volume of Best Novellas, *not yet available for review, in which his batting average is much higher.*

Collected in — AND I WORKED AT THE WRITER'S TRADE by Malcolm Cowley, Penguin Books, 1979.

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showing at award time may be accounted for innocently enough by the natural fecundity of writers in their early thirties, as well as by the ordinary mechanics of literary careers. Older writers of established reputation tend to devote more of their time and talent to novels. Younger writers are often best able to claim their place in the sun by devoting their best energies to shorter forms and then crossing their fingers at award time.

The awards are a serious business. If there were any doubt of that, one need only listen to the testimony of the winners, one of whom, George Martin, in accepting his award this year, spoke of how he'd lusted after a Hugo when first he'd attended a world convention in the early days of his career. Another, Orson Scott Card, wrote eloquently in a fanzine of his own high regard of the significance of both awards.

Man is a political animal and inclined to pursue self-interest, so it should not be wondered at that in the past, some writers have politicked for these awards with varying degrees of high-mindedness and high-handedness. My reason for noting so much that is common knowledge is not to deplore human nature but to suggest that the work of this latest generation of sf writers—the Labor Day Group, I'd like to call them, since that is when they are most likely to be found all together—has been unduly and unnecessarily influenced by the clubhouse atmosphere of the sf world and its awards systems. A sense of personal vision is rare in their stories, while a sense of writing to please a particular audience, Fandom, is sometimes obtrusively present—as it was, for me, in last year's double award-winner, "The Persistence of Vision" by John Varley.

There are solid behaviorist reasons why this might be so. Having served their literary apprenticeships in the sf magazines during the '70's (a decade otherwise notable for disillusionment and retrenchment), they were witness to the failure of the "New Wave" both as an esthetic program (art can't be brought into existence by manifestos) and commercially. To a reasonably level-headed apprentice writer it became increasingly clear through the '70's that art was a problematical commodity and that most of what went by that name was claptrap anyhow. By contrast a competent entertainment engineer who could guarantee production of *n*-many pages of fictionware might do very well for himself. Look what happened to *Star Wars*. What the market rewards are simple problems clearly solved by wholesome, likeable characters. Ideally, the interest of the work should be telegraphable in one sentence: "What if there were a world as big as its orbit round its sun?" "What if snakes were beneficient instead of poisonous?" "What if there were Giant Insects?" It was good enough for grandpa, it was good enough for grandma, and it's good

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enough for the Labor Day Group. If art's to be part of it, it must be the kind that conceals art, and conceals it well; on the whole, it isn't worth troubling about. Art, these days, is a branch of the welfare department, and worth maybe $5,000 in an NEA grant. A Hugo can bring in $50,000 on the next paperback contract.

Some cases in point, from this year's crop of Labor Day Group stories:

Ed Bryant's (or bryANT's) "giANTS" (in the Dozois annual) is about giant ants, like in the movie, *Them*, only different. There are these ants in South America, see, that are really scary and they're heading this way, and here's bryANT's twist—we defeat the ant invasion by inducing immoderate growth, since beyond a certain size exoskeletons are dysfunctional. I remember encountering the same observation some years ago in a book of essays by Arthur Clarke, and I'm sure the idea wasn't original to him. Bryant dramatizes this common knowledge by having someone unaware of it informed of it, after much cajoling, by someone in the Know—generally, and in this case, a poor sort of drama, since by a simple shift of point of view the story is reduced to the bare notion one already knows. Inexplicably, "giANTS" won a Nebula. Congratulations.

The winner of the Hugo for short story, George R.R. Martin's "The Way of Cross and Dragon," appears in both the Dozois and Wollheim/Sara annuals. Though full of a good deal of incidental sf invention (droll aliens, pretty planets), the dramatic structure is like that of "giANTS," but the idea being ferreted out by the protagonist is both more original and full of resonance. Martin contends that all supernatural religions are the result of someone's decision to tell a whopping lie, a contention that deserves ampler and more serious treatment than it receives here. Were it set in 100 A.D. instead of in the far future, it might have grown teeth at least as effective as those belonging to Martin's other winner this year (capturing both Hugo and Nebula for best novelette), "Sandkings" (in the Carr and Dozois annuals). Like "giANTS," "Sandkings" is an insect-horror story; unlike "giANTS" it fleshes out its premise with ample and well-paced suspense, heaping on grue and ingenuity all to the way to the gratifyingly inevitable end. Apart from a couple of sideways glances in the direction of sex, "Sandkings" could have appeared in 1940 in *Astounding* without a ripple of anachronism, and if it had, we'd still be reading it today. I think it's destined not only to become a great movie but a classic board game as well: it's that neat.

There are at least three nominated short stories in the annuals that seem superior to the winning stories by Bryant and Martin. "Vernalfest Morning" (in the Dozois annual) is a relatively minor effort by Michael Bishop,

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but fiercely imagined within its small compass. (Bishop, I should remark, is probably the least representative figure in the Labor Day Group. Numerous stories and the recent novel, *Trans-figurations*, evidence a degree of extramural literary savvy and ambition that promises still better things to come. His chief point of correspondence with the Group is a willingness to set his novels in the far future of the sf consensus in which all trade sf ideas comfortably coexist—space warps, telepathy, aliens, catsup, onions, mayonnaise.)

"Unaccompanied Sonata" by Orson Scott Card (in the Wollheim/Saha annual) is a grimly effective futuristic fairy tale, whose pastel colors adorn a heart of purest anthracite. The best story Bradbury's written in years.

My own favorite among the also-rans is Connie Willis's first published story, "Daisy in the Sun" (in the Wollheim/Saha annual). With lyric ellipses Willis describes a world in the grip of epidemic schizophrenia precipitated by news that the sun is going nova. The heroine is a sexually disturbed adolescent girl in a condition of fugal amnesia. All the way through I thought, "This won't work," but it did. What a great way to begin a career.

So far, I realize, 1979 doesn't look so bad. Indeed, from the 30 stories at hand I'd be able to assemble a selection of at least eleven tales that fizzed agreeably in the mind. That selection would include all the stories mentioned above, except "giANTS," and, from the Carr annual, stories by Philip K. Dick, James P. Girard, and George Turner; from the Dozois annual, a novella by Hilbert Schenck, "The Battle of the Abaco Reefs," that exercises the geopolitical imagination as well as a week of dire headlines. That's nine. Well, put in Rick Gauger's "The Vacuum-packed Picnic" (in the Carr annual), a piece of good-natured high tech bawdry, and then let the flip of a coin decide between "Options" by John Varley (in the Carr and Wollheim/Saha annuals) and "Down and Out on Ellfive Prime" by Dean Ing (in the Carr and Dozois annuals). Varley pussyfoots about a ticklish subject and finally avoids it, but his evasions are at least craftsmanlike. The pleasure of Ing's tale is in the engineering problem he's devised for his space colony; superadded to that, however, is a thesis, stated but not to my mind proven, that bums will survive better in outer space because...I can't remember why.

Meanwhile down at the bottom of the barrel it would be possible to assemble a counter-anthology of the worst of these 30 "best" stories that few readers could read through without dark thoughts about 1979 and what it may bode for the future of sf. No need to castigate those by novices; they are less to blame than their editors for being picked before they're ripe. My pick of the worst by Labor Day Group members flies in the face of received

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opinion, since one (bryANT's "giANTS") got a Nebula, another was a Hugo nominee (McIntyre's "Fireflood," which I discussed in the July '80 Book column), and the third, "The Thaw" by Tanith Lee, appears in both the Carr and Wollheim/Saha annuals. "The Thaw" is a conventional sf horror story told in the wisecracking style of a '50's sitcom and set in a woefully underimagined far future.

Finally it isn't worth my time or yours to explain exactly why a particular dumb idea is particularly dumb, especially when the dumb ideas come from pros who probably know better and intend to have the damn thing published anyhow. So without elaboration, and one loud boo each, I will add to the list of worst stories: "Galatea Galantee, the Perfect Popsy," by Alfred Bester and "Time Shards" by Gregory Benford (both in the Carr annual); "Bloodsisters" by Joe Haldeman (in the Dozois annual); and "The Locusts" by Larry Niven and Steve Barnes (in the Wollheim/Saha annual).

Enough of trees and back to the forest. It occurred to me that the fault may not lie with the 1979 harvest but with there being too many harvesters in the field. Can sf support three competing anthologies? By way of odious comparison I got down two of Judith Merril's anthologies, from 1965 and 1966, and yes, by golly, not only were tomatoes jucier in that golden age but there were more of them—33 contributions in Merril's '65 volume and 35 in '66. Nor was hers the only annual at the time, for Carr and Wollheim were producing one for Ace. In both years there were more stories of Hall of Fame calibre, stories I still remember vividly at this distance in time, a much larger proportion of work by writers of established reputation within the field, and—the most significant difference—several stories by writers who weren't dues-paying members of the sf club. In 1979, by contrast, none of editors has ventured outside the ghetto walls (unless Carr's taking Dick's story from *Rolling Stone College Papers* can be construed that way). In their Honorable Mention lists at the back of their books neither Carr nor Dozois cite any stories from non-genre magazines or anthologies. (The Wollheim/Saha anthology doesn't trouble to provide a list of runners-up, nor does it offer a survey of the sf year, as the other two annuals do. People who like to talk to the driver of the omnibus will miss such small courtesies.)

It's no longer enough to speak of the walls of the ghetto: now there's a dome, and (on the evidence of most of these stories) communications with the outside have ceased. For a *writer's* organization to give an award to such a story as "giANTS" is tantamount to erecting a sign at the airlock, saying: "Science Fiction—abandon taste, all ye who enter here." Indeed, I've heard it argued that sf transcends, in its nature, the canons of mundane literary taste. How often, though, what seems trans-

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cendence from one point of view looks like a lack of plumbing from another.

This is not to suggest that sf, in its institutional aspects, should be disbanded. Conventions are fun, and trophies decorate the den like nothing else. But for writers (or readers) to frame a standard of excellence based on purely intramural criteria, and to make it their conscious goal to *win an award* is to confuse literature with bowling.

Of a book as good as Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, a reviewer can say very little except, Take my word, this is superlative, read it. Not only does *Timescape* accomplish the specific task of science fiction (what that task is may be assumed, in these pages, to be self-evident), but it also clears the hurdles of the mainstream novel with strength, grace, and intellectual distinction. Its prose is lucid, flexible, and eloquent without straining after 'poetic' effects. Its characterizations have a precision and amplitude of observation rare in even the best sf, since it is difficult to be precise or observant about hypothetical social structures. Contemporary realism necessarily has the edge in that regard, but Benford is able to possess himself of that advantage by setting half his novel in 1962. His scrupulous treatment of the recent past becomes his touchstone for that part of the book set in 1998, a date equidistant (from 1980) in the near future. 1962 seems amazingly long ago, an Age of Golden Oldies, blithely unaware of the crises pregnant in the womb of time; crises that have become by 1998 an economic and ecological debacle of global proportions.

The plot concerns the efforts of a group of Cambridge physicists in 1998 to get a message back to the scientific establishment of the year 1962 warning them of the world's impending doom. The medium of communication is a beam of tachyons, a particle theoretically symmetrical in relation to time and thus able to ignore the One Way traffic sign that grosser particles (and mortals) must obey. It will give away few turns of the plot to note that the tachyons get through to 1962, since the story's suspense depends rather on how the message is interpreted and whether it is to be believed, a drama that allows full scope to Benford's ability to portray scientists in the round—as politicians, as professional intellectuals, as members of a common culture. As a group portrait of the scientific community *Timescape* compares favorably with the novels of C.P. Snow or even with a non-fiction work like Watson's *The Double Helix*.

As a work of the imagination, comparison becomes more difficult, since sf writers so seldom attempt anything of this magnitude and seriousness. (Seriousness is usually a term I cringe at, since it implies a kind of moral superiority in a work of art. Nevertheless, I would call this 'serious fiction' in the sense that it eschews play-

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fullness and works with the simplest materials on the largest possible scale to create a moral paradigm of great hortatory force.) Beside it even such admirable recent works as *The Dispossessed* or *The Fountains of Paradise* (to cite works that share Benford's 'seriousness' and his determination to express the imaginative core of scientific thought) seem thin and schematic.

While I can't pretend to judge the physics of the book as a physicist, I'm willing to defer in such conjectures to the authority of Dr. Benford, who heads the physics department of a major university and is accounted *the* expert on tachyons. I'll take his word on tachyons. However, when the characters began to speculate about standard time-travel paradoxes, such as "Was that my grandfather I murdered last night and should I *warn* him about me?" I feel no such compunction. The only answers to such eternal quandries are those that art provides, the sense of closure that comes when an engrossing story finds the tellingly right cadences for its finale.

To speak in more detail of the beautiful resolution of the plot would be to spoil the pleasure of a first reading. Avoid, if you can, the inside blurb of the book jacket, which gives away far too much of the story. Indeed, just throw away the book jacket—it's sinfully drab.

Timescape is a superlative novel, i.e., beyond comparison. Read it and proselytize for it. This is one of those rare works of sf, like *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, that can speak to the unconverted.

Coming soon

Next month: 'In the Western Tradition," a new novella by Phyllis Eisenstein, about a project to view the past and a woman who becomes obsessed with it. Also, new science fiction by Ted Thomas, Bob Shaw and others.

Soon: "Desert of Stolen Dreams," a novella by Robert Silverberg. This takes place on the Lord Valentine world of Majipoor but is not a sequel; it is a brand-new and independent story about the adventures of a coronal who ruled a thousand years before Valentine.

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It's been such a long time since we last published a deal with the devil story that we couldn't resist this entry by Michael Armstrong, who writes that he is "24, raised and educated in Florida, attended Clarion in 1975, left Sarasota in 1979 and in a fit of sanity moved to Anchorage, Alaska. I now live in a log cabin with two other Florida refugees and the obligatory writer's cats. I am unmarried and make my living as an archeological aide of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

Absolutely the Last, This Is It, No More, The Final Pact With the Devil Story

BY MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

Watson Everton
P.O. Box 666
Peoria, IL 61601
12/2/79

Red White, Ed.
Heavy Mental
645 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10012

Dear Red,

Here's my latest story. It's not the one I told you about over lunch the other day, but I'm sure you'll find it suited to your needs, as it has lots of tits and ass and ray guns and silver lamé, not to mention a few other neat surprises. Maybe you could get Corben to illustrate it? I'm sure you'll love it. Please send the advance to the above address so my agent doesn't find out, okay?

Best,
Watson

Heavy Mental
645 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10012
January 24, 1980

Dear Wat,

I'm returning your manuscript, with much regret. Your story, "Dinner for Two," is of course a brilliant work of fiction, but we find the subject matter a bit dated. The tits and ass were fine, the BEM acceptable, but even with a ray gun and a silver lamé jumpsuit, the Devil is still the Devil, and pacts are still pacts. We can't use it.

If you could send us the story you promised about the Venusian enema bandit, we could probably use that.

Regrets,
Red White

P.O. Box 666
Peroia, IL 61601
2/1/80

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Ned Nova, Ed.
Cosmni
606 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022
Dear Ned,

Well, I haven't quite gotten around to that black hole story I promised you, but if you can wait for it, I'll have it in a month or so. Meanwhile, because I feel so guilty about all this, here's a short to help fill in the gap. I hope you enjoy it.

Best,
Watson

Cosmni
606 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022
March 5, 1980

Dear Watson,

It's science fiction, and it's good, and it certainly is *Cosmni*, but it's been done, I'm afraid.

Regrets,
Ned Nova

P.O. Box 666
Peoria, IL 61601
3/10/80

Roderick Silvercog, Ed.
Nude Dementions
Box 13120, Station Z
Oakland, CA 94661
Rod,

To be frank, I've tried *Cosmni* and *Heavy Mental* with this, but they don't seem far out enough to take it. I think you are. Here it is.

Hot jets,
Watson

Nude Dementions
Box 13120, Station Z
Oakland, CA 94661
27 April 1980

Wat,

I'm far out, but not *that* far out, and not that stupid, to take "Dinner for Two." Try Teri; he's been printing some weird stuff lately.

Sorry,
Rod

POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
5/3/80

Teri Truck, Ed.
Lotsaverse
11007 Gangway Place
Oakland, CA 94611
Dear Teri,

Here's another thrill packed Everton masterpiece. Try not to forget that my double Hugo/Nebula story in *Lotsaverse 10* doubled sales in the reprint edition. I haven't.

Sincerely,
Watson

Lotsaverse
11007 Gangway Place
Oakland, CA 94611
9/3/80

Dear Wat,

Sorry I took so long getting "Dinner for Two" back to you. Strange things have been happening to me that you wouldn't *believe*. My humble apologies.

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About your story...Well, it *is* another thrill packed Everton masterpiece, but I need a pact-with-the devil story like I need another divorce. Frankly, I didn't like this when Rod showed it to me, and I don't like it now. I *did* sneak a look at that Venusian enema bandit story you sent him. If he doesn't grab it, send it to me.

Best,
Teri Truck

Screwtape Literary Agency
13 Sterling Drive
Westport, CT 06880
10/12/80

Skunkbreath,

That skiffy grapevine is spreading this nasty rumor around that you're submitting an *awful, awful* story behind my back. What gives, asswipe? You trying to cut me out of my 15 percent, or what? Don't cross me, punk. Remember who took you on hot out of Clarion when even *Broom* wouldn't touch you. Straighten up, Watson, or your ass is fried. Don't forget who still has your option.

Remembering You
Always,
Bezel B. Bob

P.S. And *don't* call me collect.

P.O. Box 666
Peoria, IL 61601
11/7/80

Dear Bezel,

You mean "Dinner for Two?" That little story? Why, hell, Bez, your fee on that would hardly pay the postage. Not to worry. I just wanted to get a new feel of the market, that's all. If the money is a problem...we can talk.

No, I haven't forgotten what you've done for me. And I haven't forgotten our agreement. If I remember right, I have until 8/14/82 before my option is up. You don't mind if I try to do my part to fulfill the terms of the option, do you? I mean, a deal's a deal, right? So get off my back while I try to get that *special* story published, okay? Comprende?

Working hard,
Watson

Screwtape Literary Agency
13 Sterling Drive
Westport, CT 06880
11/12/80

Dickface,

Well, I suppose as long as it's *that* story, okay, I don't care about the ten percent. I guess it would be hard for me to be objective about marketing it now, wouldn't it? I do have my reputation to consider, so tell everyone I *told* you to market it on your own "to get a new feel of (sic) the market," as you say.

Meanwhile, here's the advance and signed contract from Rocket Books for your latest short story collection. Write the intros and we can go to press. Adeline says she wants all the latest Hugo and Nebula winners in there (of course), but that you can put in anything else you want, hint, hint.

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Thinking of you,
Bez
P.S. That's August *13*, 1982, asswipe.

POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
1/17/81

Bez,

Well, I've been working straight through on those intros since Thanksgiving; thank God (sorry) for Dexedrine. Here they are. You'll notice I've included an exciting new Watson Everton story just for this anthology—a little piece I did around Christmas called "Dinner for Two." The intro for that should explain *everything* to the world. Take that, you hornhead! Just in case you were thinking of slowing down the publishing of the book, I've got a few friends at Rocket Books to make sure things go smoothly.

You put up a good fight, Bez.

Best,
Watson

Screwtape Literary Agency
13 Sterling Drive
Westport, CT 06880
1/26/81

Fartbreath,

I showed the anthology to Adeline at Rocket, and she says she likes the book, except for "Dinner for Two." She *did* like the introduction to it, about how you had this pact with the devil that you had to sell and publish a pact-with-the-devil story or the devil took your soul, but she wants to run it without the story, and then maybe do a fake obituary *a la* Bob Tucker. I told her to go ahead, figuring you wouldn't mind.

Better,
Bez

P.S. Sorry to hear about your friend Bobbie getting his neck caught in the printing press. That really was a tragic accident. Went to Clarion, didn't he?

POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
2/3/81

Bez,

Of course I mind! Tell that cheap little slit that she better take the book as I want it, or she can just shove it. I'm not some punk writer—I'm Watson Everton, six time Hugo-winner. Got it, *pal*? All or nothing.

Fuming mad,
Watson

Screwtape Literary Agency
13 Sterling Drive
Westport, CT 06880
2/17/81

Jizzumnose,

Talked to Adeline today, and she says that nothing is fine. If you'll just return the advance, we can buy back the contract.

Sincerely,
Bez

666 Post Office Boxx
Peoria, IL 61601
2/25/81

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Bez,

Who am I to argue with the editor of Rocket Books? Do it her way.

Watson

MEMO
TO: Adeline Bow, Editor
FROM: Peter Myer, Publisher
RE: Your Resignation
3/1/81

Adeline:

This is just to acknowledge receipt of your resignation as editor of Rocket Books. You have been an admirable editor, bringing us many fine new books. Acceptance of your resignation pains me, but who am I do stand in the way of a person's career? Good luck in your new role as an agent. I understand the Screwtape agency is one of the best. I should know—they certainly do drive hard bargains!

P.O. Box 666
Peoria, IL 61601
3/11/81

Snake Slither, Ed.
Jonathan Herovit's SF Magazine
Box 13999
Philadelphia, PA 19101

Dear Snake,

Love your new mag—congrats on the Hugo! Here's a cute little yarn that's humorous and witty and upbeat as well. The idea may have been done a little, but I think I've provided a fresh new insight.

Best,
Watson

Jonathan Herovit's SF Magazine
Box 13999
Philadelphia, PA 19101
3/30/81

Wat,

No on this one. Love the writing, but somehow I don't think cloning the devil provides a "fresh new twist" to a pact-with-the-devil story. Send us one of your slime worm stories; we'd love to have *that*.

Regrets,
Snake Slithers

POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
4/10/81

Demon Night
Obit
1612 Horn Lane
Eugene, Oregon 97404

Dear Demon,

Heard' OBIT is back publishing. Huzzah! Here's a little something for you to chew on, you little imp.

Best,
Watson

Obit
1612 Horn Lane
Eugene, Oregon 97404
5/5/81

Watson,

I chewed on it, and it came up a sickly green. As far as I'm concerned, this is just another goddamn phantom devil story. How about sending me one of your Venusian snot vampire stories?

Sincerely,
Demon Night

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POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
5/7/81

Jonathan Chomsky-Lantz
UNBIRTH MAGAZINE
Box 1984
Cambridge, MA 02139
Dear Jonathan,

Love your new little magazine. I'll be glad to support it any way I can. I understand you're doing offbeat stories by established pros. Here's one I think you might like.

Best,
Watson Everton

UNBIRTH MAGAZINE
Box 1984
Cambridge, MA 02139
8/8/81

Dear Wat,

Sorry to take so long with this, but you know how it is. I'd love to publish "Dinner for Two," but unfortunately it's not quite offbeat enough for what we had in mind. *Do* send us another story, maybe something to go with your first sale? I always did love your Venusian slime worm snot vampire series.

Best,
Jonathan

POB 666
Peoria, IL 61601
9/15/81

Steven Grogg
Fraternity SF Magazine
Box 947
Clement, SC 29631
Dear Steve,

Glad to see you've dragged *Fraternity* back out of the closet. Just for old times, here's a story for your next issue.

Best,
Watson

Fraternity SF Magazine
Box 947
Clement, SC 29631
11/12/81

Dear Watson,

Sorry to see you've dragged "Dinner for Two" back out of the closet. Just for old times, I'm rejecting it.

Sorry,
Steven

P.O. Box 666
Peoria, IL 61601
12/19/81

Nick Neofen
Gosh Whiz Quarterly
#10 Hectagraph Lane
Woebegone, AL 33601
Dear Nick,

Merry Christmas! I remember the days when I was young and trying to put out a fanzine. Kind souls like Isaac Asimov and Roger Zelazny and Harlan Ellison would periodically contribute, at little or no pay. Well, I remember them, and I owe all those good people a karmic debt or two. The best way I can do that is to let you have this story, because I think your fanzine shows great promise. I would be proud

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to have "Dinner for Two" published in *Gosh Whiz Quarterly*. However, you know how the Science Fiction Writers of America are—can't give everything away. If you could just send a few bucks for postage, that would keep 'em off my back.

Good luck,
Watson Everton

Gosh Whiz Quarterly
#10 Hectagraph Lane
Woebegone, AL 33601
1/6/82

Dear Mr. Everton,

Wow, that was neat of you to send me "Dinner for Two." It was a pretty nifty story, even though it *was* a pact-with-the-devil tale that's been done to death. I was going to publish it, but, heck, my father, the Baptist minister, got *real* mad at me when he saw the cover I did for the last ish. Made me burn all my sci-fi books, canceled my subs to all the mags, and wrecked my mimeograph machine. I guess you could say I've gone gafia for a bit. Sorry. Here's your story back. Send it to me when I'm editor of *Cosmni*, in about fifteen years, ha-ha.

Thanks,
Nick Neofen

Screwtape Literary Agency
1819 Minuteman Place, Suite 13
Westport, CT 06880
4/17/82

Turdteeth,

Ran into a friend of mine over at Speedo Printers, the people who do a lot of work for You're So Vain Publishers, Inc. Now I don't want to point an accusatory finger or anything, but I would like to remind you that according to Section 430,1(c) of our agreement, you are prohibited from publishing the *special* story yourself. And don't try using a pseudonym, either. I've got good intelligence in this business, pal. You might say a lot of people owe me a few debts. Don't try it, schmuck.

Still Thinking of
You,
Bez

Final Hazardous Visions
2020 Cagey Drive
Sherman Oaks, CA 91302
5/2/82

Watson Everton
c/o Our Lady of Mercy Hospital
Ward E, Tenth Floor
Peoria, IL 91602

Dear Watson,

A friend of mine at Rocket Books was clearing out their files, found a copy of "Dinner for Two" with the introduction you did for your latest collection. He sent it to me to read. Fantastic! I *love* it. I'm going ahead and buying it for my anthology, complete with your introduction. I think it's a Nebula nominee for sure. Incredible! This is the kind of story *nobody* else would buy—which is exactly why I'm buying it. Why didn't you send it to me sooner?

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Sincerely,
Harmless Edison
encl: check, contract

Our Lady of Mercy Hospital
Ward E, Tenth Floor
Peoria, IL 91602
5/25/82

Dear Mr. Edison,

Thank you for your very nice letter to Mr. Everton. As Mr. Everton is still indisposed and cannot even *think* of writing, even a letter, he asked me to write this for him. He thanks you for buying his story, "Dinner for Two," and has endorsed the check and signed (after a fashion) the contract (enclosed). He does have one small question. I do say I can't approve of his language, but he insisted. The question is; "WHEN THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING TO PUBLISH THE DAMN BOOK?" I'm sorry, but Mr. Everton has been under considerable stress lately. Your good news, though, has cheered him up, although he still suffers from his delusions about devils. Again, thank you for your nice letter.

Sincerely (for Mr. Everton),
Wanda Janison,
RN, Ward E

2020 Cagey Drive
Sherman Oaks, CA 91302
6/3/82

Dear Watson,

I certainly hope you are feeling better. More good news! Your story was the last one I bought. I just finished my introduction a week ago, and have sent the whole thing to New York RUSH. They're trying to get it out by mid-August, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Hugo Gernsback's first erection, or something like that. Looks like there will be a big bash in Los Angeles around that time. You, of course, are invited. Details forthcoming.

Best,
Harmless

86 Skylark Road
Peoria, IL 61603
8/4/82

Dear Harmless,

Thanks for the formal invitation to the *Final Hazardous Visions* party. As you well know, I think the publishing will come in the nick of time, so to speak. Anyway, I plan to arrive in Los Angeles on August 13, flight 483, American Airlines, ETA (your time) 5:36 p.m. I've gone ahead and made reservations for the hotel, etc., but if you could have someone there to meet me, I'd appreciate it.

Thanks,
Watson

TO: WATSON EVERTON, 86 SKYLARK ROAD, PEORIA, IL 61603
WESTERN UNION, 7864986729087*****
WATSON:
CANCEL FLIGHT TO LA STOP PUBLISHING POSTPONED UNTIL 9/1/82 STOP SORRY STOP HOPE THIS DOESN'T

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UPSET PLANS STOP TRIED TO CALL COMMA YOU WEREN'T HOME STOP STOP END END

HARMLESS

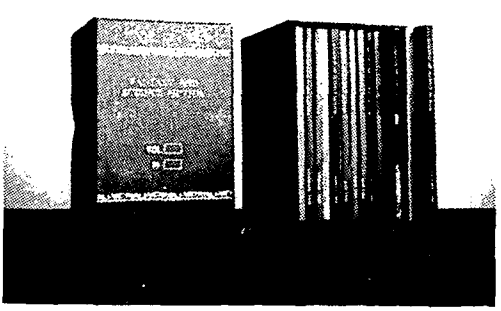
Screwtape Literary Agency
1819 Minuteman Place, Suite 13
Westport, CT 06880

Chuck Beige, Ed.
Loco: The Newszine of the Skiffy World
44 Ridgecreek Road
Oakland, CA 94611

Dear Chuck,

Here's the eulogy I promised you for Watson. He was, as you know, not only a client but a good friend. We will miss him, in more ways than one, but somehow I am confident we will meet somewhere Out There among the stars, where all true science fiction people go to die. What I *can't* understand is how that engine fell off that DC-10. I thought they had that problem licked. I will, of course, join the movement to ground DC-10s permanently. I think a suiting memorial to Watson would be to form a fund in his name for that purpose. I will be glad to be treasurer for such a fund. It is, after all, the least I can do for such a very dear friend.

Sincerely,
Bezel B. Bub



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Nicholas Yermakov wrote "A Glint of Gold," July 1980 and "Melpomene, Calliope and Fred" December 1980. His new story starts with the interesting premise of a therapeutic implant that connects the minds of five strangers, producing a Network full of possible wonder...and danger.

The Orpheus Implant

BY
NICHOLAS YERMAKOV

I had a strange sensation of inverted flying, watching the ceiling lights rolling slowly by. Down there, it seemed that a battle had been fought with many mortars; the tiled terrain was pockmarked with tiny holes, miniature craters. I knew that I should probably have been feeling very nervous, but, instead, I felt rather detached. Detached. Like the heads that kept swimming into view and peering down at me. It felt like I was about to execute an Immelmann. The gurney stopped, swiveled around and backed into an elevator. I waited for that old sensation in the stomach that always came with elevator rides, but either it didn't come or else I missed it. For someone who was about to have his head cut open, I felt very relaxed. I wondered, vaguely, what it was that they had given me.

I felt myself being gently lifted off the gurney and placed onto a table. I couldn't seem to feel their hands. More heads swimming into view and looking down, doctor smiling. Or was it a nurse, maybe? Hard to tell, vision blurry, and they all look the same, little skullcaps and green suits...Concentration fading, losing gaps in time....

"How's the heart?"

"Normal sinus rhythm."

"What's b.p.?"

"One forty over eighty-five, steady."

"Okay, let me know when I can start....".

"I don't feel any different."

The doctor didn't smile as well as Lillian. "You won't. Not for a while, yet."

"No, I mean, I still feel like me. No one else is there...."

"Oh, I see, no, of course not.

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You've only just received the neuro-cybernetic implant, that's all. You don't know how to use it, yet. That comes much later. First, we have to make certain that there won't be any complications."

"Complications?"

"Not to worry. The operation was a relatively simple one. We don't expect any complications; it's just routine. You know, standard procedure. In fact, you'll be up and about in no time. All you have to do right now is rest. Just get some sleep, relax, enjoy your stay."

"I never did get any ice cream."

"What flavor do you like?"

"Bourbon."

"Don't know if we have that. How about butterscotch?"

"Fine. Leave out the butter."

I turned my head slightly and looked out the window. The bandages didn't seem to bother me too much. I felt that they were there, but they weren't uncomfortable. They had lowered the shades, so that the room wasn't flooded with light, but there was a pleasant railing effect from the sun, crisscrossing my bed with alternating strips of light and shadow. I felt lonesome and more than a little anxious, and I wished that Lillian would come and see me. It was amazing how quickly and how much I had come to depend on her, a woman that I really didn't even know.

She had one of those very rare smiles, genuine, sparkling and totally contagious. I recalled how she always leaned towards me a little when we spoke, and I remembered how good she always used to smell. A truly stunning woman, the kind that I can never really talk to without bumbling, but she had somehow made it very easy.

"Let's see if I've got it straight," she had said, with that dazzling smile of hers. "What worries you, maybe even frightens you a little, is the idea that you won't be in control. That you'll be an open pipeline to the gestalt, the other members of your circle. Right?"

I had nodded, awkwardly.

"Let me try to explain how the Network functions," she said, gently placing her hand upon my arm. "In the strictest sense of the word, you will be strangers. Technically. You will never have met before. Not even by chance. We are very thorough on that account. In fact, while it is possible for you to meet another member of your circle, it's not encouraged and we don't make it easy. Don't misunderstand, it isn't that we don't allow it, but we've found that it works better when you never meet. It's more beneficial, in the long run and it eliminates some of the threat that would be present in a normal social intercourse. Initially, that's very important. But what I mean when I say that there won't *really* be any strangers is that we put our circles together with a great deal of care. A great deal of time and research goes into it in order to make it as safe as possible for you. Everyone who enters the Network,

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does so only after we've compiled an exhaustive psych profile. Emotional compatibility is important, since you'll have to function together as a gestalt.

"Now, for example, when you enter the Network you'll be physically located here, in New York, while another member of your circle might be in Los Angeles and another in London, possibly. And it won't really be a case of opening up your innermost self to another individual, not exactly. You will be part of a gestalt. At no time will you ever be in any danger of losing your individual identity, but all of you *will* be together, as a gestalt. The key words are *emotional reinforcement.* We have found that a circle of five works best. And the circle itself is an ongoing mutual therapy. You take care of each other."

She had opened a drawer in her desk and taken out a small glass case, approximately an inch square. She held it out to me. I took it, gingerly, suspecting what it was.

"This is the Orpheus Implant?"

"That's it."

It was encased solidly, resting on some sort of white material, some sort of plastic, most likely.

"Somehow, I pictured it as being smaller."

"It *is* smaller. The glass magnifies it, so that you can see it better. Technically, it's a neuro-cybernetic implant, but Carl came up with the name 'Orpheus' after we were dubbed the Purgatory Network."

I smiled, appreciating the joke. "Dr. Younger sounds like quite a guy. I'd like to meet him."

"He is," Lillian agreed, "and perhaps you will meet him, someday."

"I'm not entirely clear on how it works. I know that it goes through a satellite—"

"Not *a* satellite, we lease several. Basically, it's controlled by biorhythm. After you receive the implant, you're trained to generate a somewhat modified pattern of alpha waves, which will directly affect the implant. Hence, the term 'neuro-cybernetic.' Most of us just call that little fella Orpheus, though." She grinned.

"You mean, *I* turn it off and turn it on?"

"Essentially."

"Well, now, can't that have a negative effect? I mean, isn't the whole idea of the Network to enable its members to, eh, 'contact' each other during periods of emotional distress or whatever? Suppose—"

"Suppose someone decides not to play the game and remain turned off?" She nodded. "It's possible, but not very convenient. First of all, I can't put enough emphasis on the fact that the Network is *not* an authoritative organization. We don't make anyone do anything that they don't want to do. Now, let's assume that you decide to deny yourself to the other members of your circle. And we're only talking about *your* circle, that's five people, including yourself. Once we've

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assembled a circle, it remains a closed gestalt. No one ever comes in from outside your circle, regardless of how many people are in the Network itself. All right, so let's say that someone's undergoing some distress. They call for help, and Orpheus, via a geosynchronous satellite, relays the signal to our master computer in the home office, what we like to call the 'final circle.' The computer then decodes the signal and sends out its own, again via satellite, that lets other members of the circle know that one of them is in need. Each of these signals is keyed to the individual. You might say we tailor-make them.

"This signal might appear in your mind as a sort of background noise or static, possibly an intermittent beeper sound; there are quite a few possibilities. Anyway, this signal, or alert, cues you to respond and activate your implant, so that the circle can be completed. The idea is that everybody should respond, as a gestalt. Now, due to some problem you might have, a lack of commitment or integrity, for example, or some fear or insecurity you might be going through, you might choose to 'ignore the summons.' It doesn't happen often, because people in the Network understand that to ignore a call for help would not only be contributing to the pain of another member of the circle—and people in the same circle become *very* close, as close as it's possible to be—but that it would be doing harm to themselves, as well. Because, if *you* are hurting, you'd like the others to be there to help you through it and support you. But, in spite of all that, let's say that for one reason or another, you might go ahead and choose to ignore the summons, okay?"

I licked my lips and nodded. "Okay, what then?"

"If you continue to ignore the signal, which is possible to do, although it wouldn't feel very comfortable over a prolonged period of time, the computer will 'realize' that you are not responding for one reason or another, and we'll want to know why. This won't prevent the other four from responding, but that's not the point."

"You mean you monitor the whole Network?"

"Constantly. We have to. We're dealing with the most fragile of biological components—the human brain. Again, we don't force anyone. If, at any time, you should decide that you want out of the Network, you need only tell your local office. In your case, that would be this office. Naturally, we encourage prople to remain within the Network until they achieve stability, but we don't want to force anyone, nor can we, legally."

It sounded too good to be true. "How would you know? When you've achieved stability, I mean?"

"Trust me," she had said, smiling, "you'll know. And so will your entire gestalt. When it happens, it's a wonderful experience. I just can't find the

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words to describe it. It's a high unlike anything you've ever felt before."

"You mean *you've* been in the Network? You had an implant?"

"I still am and I still do," she replied. "And that's another thing. You don't have to leave if you don't want to. There was a time when I had some pain myself, so I can sympathize. I achieved stability, but my relationship with the others in my circle was so strong, so good and so revitalizing, that we all decided to keep it going. We support each other and continue to contribute to each other's lives. It really is quite wonderful."

"Have you ever met any of them?"

"You mean in person? No. Perhaps I will, perhaps I won't. It's really not important. I don't see how it could be possible for us to know each other any better, to be any closer than we are. We're really a very tight unit."

It was that last remark of hers, I think, that convinced me. I had felt afraid. It was the same old fear that turned me into a stammering buffoon, playing out my mindless act in front of *other people;* the same fear that made me so socially inept led me to look for reasons why I should back out at the last minute. And at the heart of the matter, the fact remained that while I so desperately wanted to bring other people into my world, I had never been able to perceive them as anything else but *other* people. *Other,* not like me. And I couldn't figure out what made me different. I tried to tell myself that I was going to ridiculous lengths for friendship, that I really didn't need this ultra-sophisticated, therapeutic "dating service," but I knew I needed *something.* I had tried it on my own and had not succeeded. Obviously, the problem was with me. Perhaps, the other members of my circle, likewise motivated, would help me to find it. And maybe even deal with it. Like a squeamish high diver, trying to postpone the dizzying plunge to unknown depths until the last possible moment, I had delayed as long as possible, wrestling with my fear. I had spent a lot of money, invested a great deal of time and energy, put forth a lot of effort. With what I considered to be herculean courage, I finally decided to see it through.

I felt drained after the surgery and I slept for long periods of time. On the third day, Lillian came to see me. It felt as though *she* was my doctor, after all the time that we had spent together. And, in a way, she was. I don't know how she did it, but she had managed to get me to tell her things that I had never been able to share with even the most persuasive of conventional therapists. I literally told her the story of my life. It didn't bother me that all of it went down on tape, to be filed and analyzed in order to enable them to complete my psych profile. The relief I had felt in telling her some of those things was immeasurable, and she understood just how hard it was for me. After all, she had been through the

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same exact process herself.

"How do you feel, Joe?"

She leaned over me and gently pressed my hand. I felt incredibly relieved to see her. I was in a private room, and there were strict orders not to bother me, but the nurses who shuttled in and out like white automatons were causing me fits of anxiety.

"Okay, I guess."

"Cheer up, you'll be out of here real soon."

"Yeah, I can't wait."

"You won't have to. If you feel up to it, we can start the training phase tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Already?"

"Sure, why not? It's easy, it won't take anything out of you, and it'll give you something to do while you're still in the clinic. Unless, of course, you'd rather wait."

"No, no, I want to get started."

"Great!" She softly brushed my forehead with her fingertips. "Try to get some sleep now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't be nervous, you're doing fine."

"I can't help it."

"I know. Everyone's a little frightened at first. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Want to try again or would you rather take a break?"

Lillian stroking my forehead with her lovely fingers. Long and thin, so gentle....

"They're waiting for me, aren't they?"

"Mmm-hmmm. But there's no pressure. Remember, they're all going through exactly the same thing. But it doesn't have to be today. All we have to worry about is getting through to the computer, that's all. We're not going to close the circle, yet. Not til everybody's ready."

"Have any of the others learned to activate their implants, yet?"

"Yes. Three of them."

"So two of us are holding up the show."

"Relax, Joe. You're not holding anything up. There's plenty of time."

"Okay, I'm relaxing."

"Good. You're doing fine. See, it's not difficult at all, is it?"

"No, not really."

"Okay. Another few minutes and we'll try again, all right?"

"Let's try it now."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Fine. Well, here goes...."

Dial jumps again, but nothing.

"I don't know if I'm disappointed or relieved."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm a little nervous about what it's going to feel like when I finally learn to activate my little buddy, Orpheus."

"In that case," Lillian said, with a grin, "you have nothing to worry about. Those last two times, you got through. The computer received your signal loud and clear."

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"Are you kidding?"

"Nope."

"Both times?"

"Uh-huh."

"You mean that's all there is to it? But I didn't *feel* anything!"

"What do you feel when you raise your arm to scratch your head?"

I did just that and she laughed.

"You see? It's all perfectly natural."

"Jeez. You might have told me. I was expecting some kind of buzzing in my brain or something."

"Sorry to disappoint you. If you want some buzzing, you're simply going to have to go out and tie one on."

I laughed. "God. That's terrific. You mean, when the dial went...that was it?"

"That was it. What do you say, a few more times, just for practice?"

"Why not? Let's see if I can't knock that satellite right out of orbit!"

Two days later, they were ready. Two days of anxiety and anticipation. Waiting for the final member of the circle—*my* circle—to learn how to activate his (or would it be a her?) implant. What would it be like, sharing thoughts with someone else? With four someone elses. Would they like me? Would we get along? Lillian had assured me that we would be compatible. I kept telling myself that it would be all right, but I couldn't help feeling like a virgin about to make love for the first time.

Would it be like love? It seemed that love was all I ever wanted. Not physical love, not lust, that was easy. Undemanding. And always, somehow, impersonal. This would be different. Five very lonely, very hungry people would suddenly be thrown together across time and space, in the most intimate of all possible ways. If they were, indeed, like me, all of them will have known pain. All of them will have known the agony of rejection, the despair of not being able to fit in, the cold, naked isolation that comes from not being able to find safety in numbers. All of them, at least to some degree, will have felt the fire in the mind. And, like myself they might almost have given up trying.

But they hadn't. *We* hadn't. Thanks to Dr. Carl Younger, and no small thanks to federal and private funding of the Purgatory Network, we had been able to buy another chance. In the words of Oscar Wilde, "...to recognize that the soul of a man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of wisdom. The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured out the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there will remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?"

Lillian was the soul of kindness. Having been through it herself, she must have known how I was feeling. She was solicitous, anticipating my every question, holding my hand, infecting me with her energetic anticipa-

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tion. It was as though I was a student who had already completed all the courses and had now only to go through the graduation ceremony.

She led me to a little room, small, black and cozy, like a womb. I felt as though I had been enveloped. It was not completely dark, there was a soft, soothing light coming from a hidden source. The room was dead to sound, and I felt as though I had entered a miniature planetarium.

"Are you excited?" asked Lillian, after we had sat down opposite each other.

"I'm a little scared."

"Don't worry," she replied, taking my hand between both of hers, "the first time is always a little nervewracking. That's just because you don't know what to expect. It's going to be easy, you'll see, and I'll be here with you. I'm not going anywhere."

"Can't you at least tell me something about the others?"

She shook her head. "I could, but I won't. You'll tell each other. That's what it's all about."

I swallowed. "When do we start?"

"We've already started. The others have been waiting for you. As soon as you get through to the computer, the circle will be closed."

I inhaled and exhaled, heavily. "You'll stay here with me?"

She laughed. "I already told you, I'm not going anywhere. When you see how easy it's going to be, you're going to feel so foolish...."

"Well, okay. Jeez. Here goes...."

I shut my eyes and activated Orpheus. I no longer needed the biorhythm machines to help me. I sent out the signal, knowing that the computer would respond with my alert code, which I perceived as the sound of crashing surf, waves breaking on the shores at the edge of my conscious mind. I brought my hand up to wipe my forehead and was amazed at how heavily I was perspiring.

I felt a giddy sort of nervousness and I chuckled, involuntarily. It was not my usual sort of chuckle. I glanced at Lillian sharply.

"What's going on?" I asked her. "What am I doing, laughing like an idiot?"

Immediately, I felt a sharp pang of regret. Sorrow for having ever laughed. Burning embarrassment. Shame.

"Sympathetic reaction," Lillian said. "First few times, it happens to everyone. You're experiencing the state of someone at the other end."

"Oh." I regretted using the word idiot. I had been applying it to myself, thinking that I was losing control. And, no sooner than the thought occurred to me, I felt the embarrassment abate, somewhat.

"Is one of them named Charles?"

Lillian nodded. "The contact must have been very tentative. He's afraid. Encourage him."

I hesitated. "How?"

"Talk to him. Out loud, if you like. It's the thought that counts."

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Feeling slightly foolish, I spoke aloud. "Charles? Are you there?"

"Yes."

"I heard him!"

She smiled and nodded. She squeezed my hand, encouraging me. "Go on."

"Charles, this is Joe. Joe Scanlon."

"Hello, Joe."

I licked my lips, not knowing what to say next. "It feels so strange...."

"Yes, doesn't it?"

Another "voice."

"My name is Martin Chenault."

"How do you do...Martin?" Charles replied, uncertainly. It was very simple to tell them apart. Charles—hesitant, shy and awkward. Martin—a bit abrasive, cynical, doubtful and yet...hoping, it seemed, to be proved wrong.

"I wouldn't mind." (Martin) *"I've been right all along and it hasn't brought me much."*

"With your attitude, I'm not surprised." A fourth persona. Strong sympathetic reaction. Without meaning to, I brushed nonexistent long hair out of my face, leaned back and crossed my legs, tightly. Not very comfortably. I uncrossed them immediately.

"You're a woman."

"Obviously." (Martin, with a wry touch of humor)

"Not quite, darling."

"Lord!" (Martin)

"Hardly." I sensed a smirk. *"Russel Davis. My friends call me Rusty. All two of them. Pleased to meet you".*

Nervousness from Charles, indignation from Martin. I had no idea where he was or who was with him, but I could 'hear' him protesting that something must hve gone wrong with his psych profile. That there must have been a mistake. That they couldn't possibly imagine that he would be emotionally compatible with "one of *those."* Charles was a bit upset at his indignation; I received waves of concern and anxiety from him. And, at the same time, I was aware of being 'watched.' I felt the presence, very subdued and cautious. Then Charles noticed it too. And, with both of us dwelling on the subject, Martin finally noticed and cut short his protestations.

"Come on, speak up," sent Martin. *"How come you're so quiet?"*

Whoever it was, there was a great deal of control in evidence. A shielding. I felt myself being held off at distance, studied, pondered.

"Won't you...won't you please say something?" (Charles)

"I believe we're being closely scrutinized, gentlemen." (Russel) *"She's not quite certain what to make of us."*

She? How did he know?

"Takes one to know one," sent Martin, sourly.

"You mean you can't tell?" Russel replied. *"How interesting, you can't, can you? Well, since the lady seems to be content to watch from the sidelines for the moment, allow me."*

Rusty seemed to be adapting to the

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process at a much faster pace than any of us. I received, as did the others, a direct sense impression from him. As perceived by Rusty, our fifth member was, indeed, a woman. I was beginning to feel it. Not that I had any personal experience of her due to my own perceptions, it was just that Rusty's sense of her became my sense of her, as well. An extremely sensitive and perceptive person, Rusty picked up on things that we hadn't sensed. I received the impression of a relatively young woman. There was a sort of freshness there, a feeling of vitality and quickness. There was also a softness, quite dissimilar from the sort of effeminate sense that had led both me and Martin to falsely suspect Rusty of being female. This softness was edged with strength. As Rusty intuitively explored her, I perceived her as a very self-contained loner, one who was used to being that way.

Nor was she waiting passively as Rusty sought her out. The gestalt was forming rapidly, naturally. I was at once both delighted and overwhelmed by the unbelievably fast flow of impressions back and forth. The strength of her personality gave her mentations greater clarity in all our minds than did Rusty's, and we saw each other through her. Like a young bird first learning how to fly, our initial attempts at communication were awkward and simplistic. And, just like that bird, which begins doing intricate maneuvers in the sky once it grasps the basics, our instinctive mental reflexes adapted rapidly to the process until we didn't even have to speak to each other. Dominant perspectives shifted constantly until our gestalt began to become more solidified, attaining a balance. Charles lagged behind, being the meekest of our lot, but with our support, he began to flourish in the circle, too.

Her name was Angela Visconti. She didn't have to tell us, she just let us know. She was twenty-eight years old and she viewed herself as being rather plain. I suspected that it was not necessarily an accurate indication of what she was like, since the way we see ourselves is often not the way that others see us, and, almost at once, an image formed in my mind of what Angela saw when she looked in the mirror, and I did not think that I would call it plain. I found her very attractive. Her reaction manifested itself in our minds as a combination of embarrassment and irritation at thinking that we might be flattering her unnecessarily. We all began to see each other in a like manner, through each other's eyes. Martin, nattily attired and groomed, a studied, almost forced sense of self-esteem; dark, slightly brooding, quick of temper, beginning to go grey at thirty-nine. Charles Dambowic, sad-eyed, sallow, looking older than his twenty-nine years, dark curly hair and high forehead, rather tweedy, Rusty, long blond hair, delicate features, decidedly effeminate, graceful,

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sharp, witty, honest and full of many previous hurts. Angela, jet-black hair, short and simple, thin, deep, contemplative, abrupt, yet cautious. And myself, as perceived by four other shared perspectives. Forty-five years old, losing my hair, self-conscious of being overweight, paranoid, suspicious nature, afraid of rejection, abundant energy beyond my ability to control it, vulnerable. Full of self-contradictions and tending to extremes.

In a curious sort of way, the experience we shared was very much like running long distance. At first, a conscious effort, controlled, deliberate exertion. Then, briefly, almost a rebellion against the natural strain, a desire to stop, slow down or take a break, blood pressure rising, heart hammering away inside the chest, pain growing sharper until it becomes an all-encompassing effort to just try to put one foot before the other. And then the pain is transcended, the mind begins to float, dissociated from the body, and the eyes glaze slightly as euphoria sets in.

After what seemed like hours, I felt myself beginning to grow hazy, on the verge of falling asleep. The others also, by stages, began to feel weaker. Charles broke the circle first, followed by Martin, and then I dropped out. Lillian informed me that the session had only lasted a mere eleven minutes and twenty-five seconds. It seemed much longer than that. I lay down and Lillian brought me a soothing cup of tea and we talked about the session, a sort of de-briefing. Within a relatively short time, she told me, it would become as natural as breathing. I would develop a more real sense of time and perspective, and, after a while, I would even be able to incorporate the circle into my daily activities, just as I had learned to answer the phone in my office and carry on my paperwork at the same time.

"Right now," she said, "you're still at the stage where you can't walk and chew gum at the same time. But it will all begin to come very naturally. You'll see how rapidly you'll be able to make progress, and it will even improve your relationships with people outside of your circle, too."

I left, tired, but enthusiastic. I felt as though I had just run a long and very hard race and I had won. And, that night, I slept more deeply than I had in years. It seemed that I was out as soon as my head hit the pillow, and I awoke feeling refreshed and anxious to start the next day.

On the advice of our trainers, we did not attempt to complete our circle unsupervised for a while. Although we wanted to, we accepted their judgment that we weren't quite ready. During the next two weeks, we completed the circle ten times. Each time, I sat in what I had come to think of as the "artificial womb," with Lillian close by, in case I needed her. Each time, we spent about an hour discussing my experiences. As she had promised, I grew more confident in the process, and the

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sensation of sharing consciousness with four other people became more and more natural for me.

I was going through a metamorphosis. Becoming completely different. Still myself, but more alive, more in control, more...centered. I ceased to suffer from insomnia and its attendant horrors. I felt more invigorated than ever before and it seemed to me that I perceived physical images with a greater clarity, as if my eyesight had actually improved. It hadn't, of course, but I knew that the sensation was due to my increased ability to notice things. I began to experience my life anew as the personalities of the others began to rub off on me.

I began to share Rusty's natural quickness of mind, his sense of humor and of fashion. I developed a more increased concern for the attitudes of others, as Charles had. I found myself becoming sharper in business matters, due to Martin's instinctual acumen for details, and I grew more thoughtful, more pragmatic, more analytical, thanks to Angela. It was as though we were leaning on each other, drawing on each other's strengths to counteract our individual weaknesses. There were times when one of us would start fraying slightly at the edges, manifesting habitual and ingrained insecurities, and I would hear the sound of surf breaking on the shore, and the circle would come together once again. We passed the point of needing supervision and I was approaching the point where I could devote a part of my attention to the circle while being attentive to my immediate surroundings. It wasn't always harmonious. With five people being brought so close together, even given the fact that we were "typed" as being emotionally compatible, that would have been impossible, but there was never anything that we couldn't handle together.

Martin would sometimes grow angry with Rusty, as if afraid of allowing himself to feel compassion for him, for one of *"those,"* even though he had been able to transcend most of his prejudice due to his new-found ability to work awhile in Rusty's shoes. Still, old habits tend to die lingering deaths. Rusty, for that matter, would sometimes become impatient with Charles, ribbing him, mocking, though not really with malice, his innocence and shyness. And I tended to be a bit hard on Angela. It took me quite a while to discover why. When I did, I was shocked to realize that I had fallen in love with her. And, of course, they all knew it before I did.

My inability to have sex with Angela did not seem to matter in the slightest. She was good and kind and giving, and what we had was better by far than any sexual relationship that I ever had. People in my office said that I looked different somehow. I never told them about receiving the Orpheus Implant and I never talked about our circle. I had no desire to. It was a personal thing for me and I wanted to

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keep it that way. It was my own private joy and I reveled in it. Then, without warning, it became a nightmare.

I had been preparing to retire and had washed up and dressed in my pajamas. I was sitting on the edge of my bed and taking off my watch to place it on the night table, beside the lamp. It was one fifteen, almost on the dot, when I started screaming.

I didn't go to work the next day. I couldn't. If I had, then I would have had to explain the scars upon my face. And there was no way I could explain why, at about one twenty-five the previous night, or morning, I had tried to rip my eyeballs out.

Lillian grew pale when she saw me. She tried one of her rainbow smiles, either out of habit or perhaps because she hoped that it would do its usual trick of setting me at ease, but that morning, nothing could have accomplished that. Besides, she couldn't pull it off. Instead, what she managed came out as a horrible, vulpine grin, a ghastly rictus.

"I want it *out*," I said, not even trying to keep my voice steady. "I want it out *right now*. I don't care if you yank the goddamn thing out right here under local anesthetic, but *I-want-it-out!*"

It grew deathly quiet in the Network office. Telephone receivers were softly replaced on their cradles in mid-conversation, typewriters stopped clacking, no one said a word. They didn't even breathe. I could see it in their faces, the way they looked at me with terror in their eyes, they *knew!*

"We'd better talk...." she started, quietly.

"There's nothing to talk about!" I shrilled, feeling myself on the edge of hysteria and not caring, unable to halt the building momentum, not wanting to. "*You see that?*" I pointed at the marks, the deep bloody gouges I had made in my own face, with my own fingers, starting half an inch away from the corner of each eye and trailing down my cheeks. "Do you know how close I came to going *blind?* Do you *know?*"

She got up and came towards me, reaching out. "Joe, please...."

I pushed her away, roughly. Without a word from her, two of the men in the office suddenly grabbed me from behind. I hadn't even noticed how they got there. I started shouting, trying to wrestle free, but they had pinned my arms, and though they weren't hurting me, I was effectively restrained. Over and over, even as I tried kicking violently at their shins, the thought kept running through my mind, they knew, it's happened before, they knew and they never told me....

They threw me face down onto a couch and I felt someone trying to pull down my pants. For a moment, the surprise, the unexpected...I didn't know what they were doing and I stopped thrashing for just the briefest mo-

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ment and then I had it figured out and I started jumping about like a trout in the bottom of a boat, but, by then, they already had my pants down around my knees. Fastest way. I had on a coat, a shirt and jacket....I felt the needle going in.

I don't know what it was. It knocked me out incredibly fast. I don't know how long I was unconscious, and I don't remember when I regained consciousness—parts of it are still a little hazy. I was aware of being half-awake and answering questions. Gentle questions. Insistent questions. Still dopey, I responded to Lillian's calm and steady voice and, at some point, I became aware that I was crying. My mouth seemed to have been working of its own accord, saying things my brain was not entirely aware of for quite some time. As my clarity began to increase and I realized that I was coming out of it, I also realized that I was back in the "artificial womb" room. And there was someone else there with us. There was only that, just the realization. I never saw the person, but I distinctly remember hearing a door opening and closing, and then I was once again alone with Lillian. I felt the restraints. Whether it was the drug still lingering or my just having been temporarily drained, I had no more anger. I was still scared, but it was a dazed, confused sort of fear, a kind of shock.

"Joe, I'm going to undo the restraints, okay? You're not going to hurt me, are you?"

Her hand touching my forehead softly, stroking....

I shut my eyes and swallowed, heavily. "Okay."

She undid the straps and helped me to sit up, allowing me to lean against her. "How do you feel?"

"Weak. Funny. Scared."

"It's all right. You're still feeling the effects of the drug, that's all. You'll be okay, just let me know if you feel like throwing up."

I shook my head and immediately regretted it. It made me feel dizzy.

"I'm sorry we had to do that to you. Believe me, I'm really very, very sorry."

"Just take it out," I said, weakly, "please, just take it out."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

"Please."

"I'm sorry, we can't do that."

I began to cry again, whimpering like a small child. "Please, Lillian, God, *please* take it out, *please*...."

"We could, Joe, we could take it out, but, believe me, please believe me, it wouldn't do any good. It wouldn't help you. In fact, Orpheus is the only hope you have."

"No, no, I don't want it, I can't take it, *please*...."

She put my head on her shoulder, like a mother trying to soothe a frightened child that just had a nightmare. Stroking my skin, fingers moving easily on all the perspiration. "I can imagine how you must feel," she said. "I can't say that I know, because it's

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never happened to me, thank God. It never happens to most people. Perhaps one circle out of ten...."

One out of ten. As many as that.

"Just try to relax. Don't fight it, you'll get sick. The effects should be completely worn off in a little while."

"You didn't have to drug me."

"I'm afraid we did, Joe. It wasn't that we were afraid you would get violent; it's just that it was the only way we could get you to relate what happened to you, *exactly*. We had to go through it. You're probably more terrified right now than you've ever been in your entire life, judging by past cases. I'm going to try and explain it to you. Just lie back and rest awhile. Pay attention.

"You've manifested a demon. That's what we call them, anyway. To be more precise, your circle manifested it, somehow. We've got to try and find out how and who. We run the most exhaustive series of psychological tests that's possible, but they're not infallible. Sometimes, some things are so deeply rooted, so well hidden, that we can never pick up on them. There are sometimes things, experiences—engrams—that are so deeply buried in your subconscious mind that not even drugs or hypnosis will resurrect them. But, sometimes, Orpheus can.

"Try to think of your mind as a very still pool of water. Somewhere, at the bottom, there is a lot of sediment, a lot of murky things. When other minds, working through the Network, come into direct contact with yours, the effect can be similar to the sudden introduction of a rushing river into that still pool. A lot of things lying on the bottom, inert and forgotten, are stirred up by the influx, and they start rising to the top. That's only half of it.

"This is the scary part. The extreme closeness of your relationship tends to affect your personality. As you put it so very well, you tend to draw on each other's strengths to counteract your weaknesses. But you can draw on each other's weaknesses as well.

"Sometimes, Orpheus produces a... freak effect. We don't know exactly how it happens, but some of the subconscious murk that gets stirred up interacts with the rising elements in the subconscious of another person in your circle, maybe two others, maybe three or all four others, it's impossible to say right now. And there's...a *fusing*. We call them demons. And the reason we can't remove the implant is that it wouldn't solve anything. Now that the demon has been manifested, its behavior will be totally unpredictable. And, since it was manifested as the result of the fusion of the five minds in your circle, it is now somewhere *within* that circle, dormant for the time being. To forcibly break that circle now by removing the implants would be like stirring up that pool of water and then trying to draw five clear cupfuls out of it. It isn't possible. The demon would become agitated and it would undergo a multiple fis-

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sion, with the result that each member of the sundered circle would be left with their own demon, with virtually no hope of ever exorcising it. Can you understand that?"

I understood only too well. Nothing could describe the sheer horror of what I had experienced the previous night, the overwhelming panic of feeling that incredibly evil and alien presence in my mind. It had taken every bit of will power I possessed, a strength born of sheer terror, to prevent it from causing me to blind myself like Oedipus.

"You told me you monitored the circles!" I said. "Couldn't you have prevented it from happening?"

"I don't know," she said. She looked very tired. "That's something about which there is dissension in the Network. Some of us feel that it's better to let sleeping dogs lie rather than risk anything like...this. Others hold the opinion that destructive impulses must be brought to the surface and dealt with. Perhaps Angela felt that she could handle it—"

"Angela?"

Lillian nodded. "That's how we monitor the circles. Four subjects, one trained Network therapist."

"You mean Angela...*Is she all right?*"

"She's fine. We're keeping careful track of all of you, now. Angela had to be sedated. It was an enormous strain for her. She imparted a great deal of her strength to you. You probably don't even realize it, but when the demon attracked you, you sent out a call for help. You have Angela to thank for the fact that you still have your eyes. She directed most of her energy towards you. Charles wasn't as lucky. When the circle was completed, the feedback hit him very hard. He's in the hospital."

"My God. what happened?"

"He was the weakest member of the circle, with the highest degree of empathy. He's had a breakdown and he's suffering from hysterical blindness. The others weren't hit quite as hard, but they're all in good hands now."

I felt like it was all a terrible dream. There was a surreal sensation of dissociation, lying there, hearing her tell me those awful things. "What happens now?"

"You're going to stay here, with me. Right here where all of us can keep an eye on you. We have all the facilities to make you as comfortable as possible. You won't be left alone for even a single second. The others are all staying at Network facilities as well, except for Charles, who's in a private clinic operated by the Network."

"How can it be stopped?" I asked, fearfully.

"We've sent for an angel."

"An *angel?*"

She nodded, "That's what we call them. In fact, he's already been here. He left this room about five minutes ago."

* * *

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The next three days were sheer hell. I didn't know which was worse, the actual experience of our demon or the anticipation of its next attack. If it wasn't for the fact that there was someone with me all the time, I don't know what I would have done. I had never before imagined what a frightening thing the Id could be. Somewhere, perhaps deep within my *own* mind, or with Charles or Rusty, Angela or Martin, a conscious entity was waiting. And knowing it was there, possibly inside me at that very moment, made me a nervous wreck.

I didn't realize how dependent I had grown on the other members of my circle. For three days, we stayed out of contact and I felt all alone and lost. And, as if that was not enough, I was filled with a burning anxiety, worried sick about Angela. What was she doing? How was she feeling? It took a conscious effort to resist sending out a signal and it was making me fall apart. I needed drugs to help me sleep, since I was afraid to shut my eyes, lest it came to me in my dreams. But, then, that was what they were waiting for. Until it came, there was nothing that could be done.

I had no idea who the angel was. I met him and I knew what he was going to try to do, but, other than that, he remained a mystery to me. He was a tall man, thin, with a high forehead and prematurely white hair. He dressed elegantly in dark business clothes and he had very large, penetrating brown eyes. I never learned his name. I had the feeling that he was purposely avoiding me. As I would be drifting off to sleep, with Lillian sitting beside me, I would become aware of his entering the room and watching, carefully. Listening and waiting. I knew that he had an implant, too. I felt his presence whenever he was near me. I knew he was strong. I only hoped he would be strong enough.

Lillian was with me when it happened. Except, this time, the catalyst was Rusty. I felt him calling, heard the crashing surf and it was there. The circle came together with a strength that slammed me back against the couch, reeling. Tears burst from my eyes. I grabbed onto Lillian so tightly that she cried out, and I heard the snap as I involuntarily broke one of her fingers. All it needed was the frantic call for help to reach us all. It knew how to turn us on; it was a component part of all our minds, digging in its claws and sending out the call, then following the signal that Orpheus sent out, flying through the ether and shrieking like a banshee, dispersing, bursting like a seed pod on the wind, yet still remaining whole.

I heard, as clearly as if he had been in the room, Rusty's scream of agony, and I felt the ringing shocks as he slammed his head against the wall. I heard Charles wailing, felt him fighting the thick leather straps that held him down, and I felt my fists connect with nonexistent flesh as Martin pummeled

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whoever was trying to help him. I was vaguely aware of being buckled in, and I could see Lillian's lips moving as she tried to talk to me, but I couldn't hear her. I was too full of the cumulative fear of four minds stripped naked and being flayed. And Angela was there, stronger than any of us, fighting. I was aware of her sitting bolt upright in a straight-backed chair, eyes wide and staring, bathed in sweat, shaking from the strain. I tasted blood, but it wasn't mine. Angela's. She had bitten through her lip.

My head felt like a water main about to burst. It was an all-out, emotional attack, and the physical pain was unbearable. A vision swam before my eyes, diffused and hazy, it seemed to shimmer and blaze, and I did not want to look at it, but I could not tear my eyes away. I screamed and felt my hands grow tense, spasming, fingers hooking into talons, trying to claw through the straps.

I felt Angela slipping away, growing weaker. Then *he* was there. His power was astonishing. I went rigid, as if *rigor mortis* had set in, totally paralyzed. The blurry image I could not identify seemed to grow closer for an instant, then I lost it.

"Help me!" Rusty sent, desperately. *"For God's sake, help me!"*

"I'M HERE," I felt his voice thunder in my brain, *"FOCUS ON ME, REACH OUT—"*

"I can't!"

"YOU MUST."

I felt Angela, coming on stronger, and then I seemed to be drawn forward, absorbed directly into Rusty, hurtling through his innermost being, perceiving images with dizzying rapidity, unable to grasp onto any of them, yet feeling a sense of everything that ever happened to him, all his pains, his wants, his fears, his needs, everything, the pure, undiluted essence of the man, and I couldn't take it. I felt vertiginous; it seemed that unbelievable pressures were squashing me into a thin and bloody ribbon. Then I became aware of Rusty sobbing and falling away. And just as I began to feel relieved that at least one of us was out of it, I felt a searing band of steel tighten down around my chest and then a brief, incandescent, stabbing pain, and I knew that we had lost Charles.

The angel couldn't save him, but he now knew, as did I, that it was either Martin or myself. I knew nothing but the pain, and it drove me to the brink of madness. I *was* insane, roaring at the top of my lungs, seeing intermittent flashes through another's eyes. Images that came and went so fast that I was unable to recognize any of them. I felt the angel's mind in mine as he began to override the pain, taking command of my motor reflexes, absorbing it all into himself. He pulled me back from the brink of the abyss, and I felt him sifting through my mind with lighting speed, hesitating at one point, then boring in...and then I knew what part I had played in the creation of the monster.

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The demon raged at him as he shifted all his strength and brought it to bear on Martin—

But it wasn't Martin.

He faltered, briefly, shocked at his mistake, and I felt Angela collapse inwardly as she lost all control, her demon possessing her completely for the first time. It was Angela. The one person in our circle whom no one had suspected. The one person whose sole purpose had been to monitor us, to take care of us, to help us achieve balance and stability. I felt Martin slip away as he was brought out of it, and then there were only the three of us left, Angela, myself, and our exorcist.

I saw her totally transformed. I felt depths of rage and guilt and loathing from her that twisted me inside, and I felt the angel, suffering the full brunt of her onslaught, staggering under its impact, yet still trying to brush it aside, to circumvent that snarling Cerberus and isolate it, to descend down into the depths and seek out its secret heart. I watched it all, unable to turn away, unable to shut my eyes, for I would see and feel it anyway. I was a part of it. Once again, that hazy image swam before me and, this time, as if through translucent glass, I could perceive a shadowy tableau.

Two figures, locked together in a passionate embrace, bucking and thrashing on a bed, the man on top, thrusting rapidly, the woman underneath, clawing at his back and raising her legs high into the air. Angela came closer, shuffling in her Dr. Denton's holding her stuffed doll under her arm. She could see her mother's face quite clearly now, and it looked like she was in pain. Her mouth kept opening and closing and she was making moaning sounds, her fingers twisting in her lover's hair. Angela gasped and her mother opened her eyes and looked at her. The man stopped his rhythmic plunging and turned his head.

"Uncle Robbie—"

Angela screamed and then I fell away. Lillian's face snapped into focus inches from my own and I burst into tears.

"She really shored up those walls, all right," said Lillian. "She repressed the memory, refusing to deal with it. Her mother must have given her a pretty heavy dose of guilt, and at that young age..." she shook her head.

"And then I came along," I said, "with my own little engrams tucked away and filed under 'forget,' Just a peculiar little kid who was different from all the others. Children can be cruel to somebody who's different. The first time I told someone that I loved her, a beautiful dark-haired little girl with sparkling eyes, she laughed at me. And she told everybody else and they all laughed at me, as well. And that little poisoned arrow struck home, deep down inside.

"For years now, I've been going around telling myself that I'm an open

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person, that I wanted to bring other people into my life, but that my vulnerability showed and other people took advantage. Amazing what you can discover when someone holds a mirror up to you. I needed other people, but I also managed to build up a distrust and a hostility towards them. I couldn't bear being rejected, being laughed at. And I needed people out of *anger*, out of desperation. The deeper I delved into Angela's mind, the more desperate I became, the more I wanted, the more I needed, the more hungry I felt until she finally realized that what I was feeling for her wasn't love, but a lust born out of anger, out of being deprived. And lust was one thing that she couldn't handle, not on that level. And it was too late for her to pull away; she had already let me in too close. And she saw something within me that the little girl, still deep inside her, knew she wasn't meant to see. So...the walls came tumbling down."

"You shouldn't blame yourself," said Lillian. She covered my hand with hers. "She'll come out of it okay. It's over."

"No," I said, slowly, "no, not quite. Martin and Rusty have gone through hell, Charles is dead, Angela ...God only knows how long it's going to take for her to get over all of it. And then there's that angel. I'll never forget him as long as I live. *Who is he, Lillian?* How was he able to stand all that...."

"I'll tell you," she replied, "if you'll swear to me that you'll keep it to yourself."

I nodded.

"There are only two others like him. They're the Network's most closely guarded secret. They have to be. It's not possible for them to lead entirely normal lives. And, individually, on their own, they probably would not be able to. They're very special people. A circle all their own. The circle includes the three of them, Dr. Younger...and the master computer itself, with all the knowledge that's been programmed into it. That's why you'll never see Carl Younger. And that's the main reason why the Network has its own private clinic. That's the real final circle. Think about the intimacy of the circle you've just experienced and then try to imagine what would happen if news of the final circle got out. Think how it would be twisted. Joe, I'm telling you this because...I want you to know that I trust you."

I nodded once again, then I smiled and took her hand. She squeezed mine back. "I still want the implant taken out," I said. "I want it out, permanently. From now on, I want to be able to let people inside on my own."

"I understand how you feel, Joe. Maybe if I went through what you've been through, I'd feel the same way. But I can't have mine removed. I don't want to. Even after what just happened, my circle is stable. It won't happen to me. Do you know what I'm saying?"

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I sighed, but I understood. And I also understood the things that we weren't saying, the things we weren't quite able to say to each other, not just yet.

"Yes, I know. I won't make any conditions anymore. I learned a thing or two from that angel character. He didn't judge. He just dug out the truth and let it see the light of day. Followed the signals and pulled Orpheus right out of Hades. I don't think that it takes a man who's part machine to do that, but maybe it takes a machine to show some of us how to deal with ourselves. A computer only works with what you give it. It doesn't bend the truth to fit its concepts." I shrugged. "You give me what you want to, and I'll work with that."

She put her hand up against my cheek. "Maybe, someday," she said, "I won't feel the need to have—"

I stopped her. "I'm not going to worry about it. I think it's nice just having you around. If and when you decide to leave Purgatory, you do it of your own free will."

She said, "Okay."

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Here is a perfect and surprising short-short about the always fascinating sf theme of first contact.

In Our Image

BY

BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

The creatures from the Aldebaran system were brown hairless bipeds with curious deep-set eyes which, in the softening dusk, struck Jeremiah as being both pained and humanoid. If it had not been for their coloring or a certain laxity of limb, they might have, in the off-light, been taken for humans.

But they're different, Jeremiah thought. They're not in our image.

As they came off the ship, he knew an odd sense of loss, of ceremony declined. The meeting had, after all, been anticipated for so long; there should be more to it than this. Nonetheless, the creatures from Aldebaran *had* arrived on schedule and as had been expected for one hundred and three years. That, at least, was something.

He moved out to the ramp to greet them. Everything had been worked out carefully; as the chosen delegate he would meet the alien plenipotentiary at the top of the ramp and they would make the first transaction. Later on, the races would mingle, and some time after that the aliens would arrange to take some of them to the stars; but first Jeremiah would have to meet them alone. All cultural fusions began with a single contact.

So profound was the moment that if he had been able to, he might have wept.

At the ramp one of the aliens separated from the others and moved forward. Did he infer trepidation in those limbs, a certain quiver in the oddly stiff gait? Anthropomorphism, Jeremiah thought, the projection of human characteristics upon the inhuman or divine — an old weakness. These beings had come from an inconceivable distance, heralding themselves through the pulsars, building through the use of Holman's Receptor a picture of a cul-

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ture and condition so incredibly removed that there was no way it could be grasped within the context of what Jeremiah believed was reality.

I'm getting old, he thought, I'm starting to run down.

The alien said, "We bring you greetings."

The language problem had also been worked out many years ago. There had been a century of time and a series of gradually more sophisticated dialectical convertors with which to teach the aliens basic English. The patterns of Aldebaranian communication were difficult to learn, and there had been many other priorities at the beginning of the millennium. Pulsar communications with an alien race moving toward a delayed rendezvous was of major but not overwhelming importance; it might have been a sensational and frightening phenomenon during the twentieth century, but this was a new era — a terrible era in some ways, an era of great challenge in other ways.

What might the Aldebaranians do if they knew our language while we did not know theirs? — some had asked at first. Take hostile action, perhaps, despite their avowed mission of peace? They already had the technological ability to travel great distances, and the stubbornness, it was said, to become an invasion fleet. But Jeremiah did not believe there was imminent danger from these creatures. Danger and tragedy came from within, not from the stars.

"Greetings," he said in response. "Welcome."

"We come in peace," the alien said.

The Aldebaranian seemed to sway unsteadily in the faint breezes, as if unused to wind currents of any kind. Jeremiah thought of extending a solicitous hand, but did not. He sensed it was not time, not just yet, for physical contact between them.

"As we have communicated, we are only the first of our race to arrive," the Aldebaranian said. "There will be many other ships in the days to come."

"Yes," Jeremiah said.

"We seek only an exchange of ideas, an understanding between our races. But of course you know this."

"We know much," Jeremiah said, "but at the same time we know little."

The alien seemed to nod in the twilight. "We are aware of the calamities you have suffered."

"Are you?"

"Yes. We, too, have suffered calamities."

"But not of the same kind."

"Yes. Of the very same kind."

Jeremiah did not speak for a time. He knew that what the Aldebaranian had said was significant, that it was in fact profound; but his mind worked only in areas of stimulus-response and possessed little insight.

At length he said, "What do you mean?"

"We are the representatives of a dead race," the Aldebaranian said. "We are what you could call androids,

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cunningly manufactured representations of a race dead for fifty-nine of your years. We were sent out as the dying act of a dying race to forage through the stars for other races with which to share both our knowledge and our folly."

"You mean," Jeremiah said, "you're machines?"

"Not precisely. We think and feel and bruise; you could destroy any of us without difficulty with your weapons. We are representations."

Jeremiah said, "I see now. I understand."

"Yes."

"It must have been lonely in your ship all these long years," Jeremiah said. "Created beings do not converse with one another, do they?"

"No."

"Created beings of the same commission, that is. Created beings of different commission *are* able to talk to one another."

"That is so."

"Just as you and I are talking now."

"Yes," the Aldebaranian said.

Jeremiah thought of the way it had been in the years gone by, when Flesh-and-Spirit had been here on Earth to talk to, and learn from, and serve. "I'm glad you have come to join us," he said. "Thank heaven for that."

"What is 'heaven'?"

"Something we will learn about later," Jeremiah said. "Together."

He extended his hand in the old posture of concord, and the alien touched him in return, and in that grasp he looked into the eyes of the creature and felt the way it must have been with Flesh-and-Spirit; saw his own features cast back at him in the glittering surfaces of the other's eyes. If he had been able to, he might have wept. But not for the same reason, now. Not any longer.

In our image after all, he thought.

And we in theirs....

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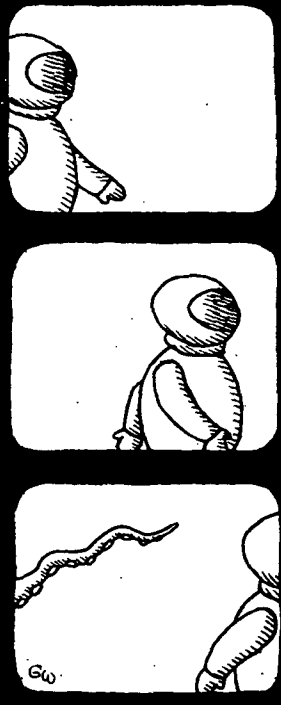
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



STRIKE STRIKEN

The actors' strike did me in this month. Here I was, with my usual optimism and faith in the goodies that commercial television was going to bring me this fall, and what happens? The actors (who I know from my own years in theater are all grossly overpaid and who eat nothing but smoked goose breast and drink champagne and smoke strange things all day instead of working) dared to strike!

So here I am, nearing my deadline and no new season on which to report. Well, not quite true. PBS, apparently being above such sordid things as labor disputes, did indeed debut a new series which is of peripheral interest to this column. Unfortunately, I feel so tepid about it that stretching a review to more than a few sentences seems beyond my capabilities.

The series is *Cosmos*, a show of pop science that stars Carl Sagan and the Universe, very definitely in that order.

The sets and special effects are pretty spectacular, I admit, but to rephrase repetition, "Special effects do not a pop science show make." I'm afraid it's Mr. Sagan who puts me off, with his hip university professor delivery and gestures and rather embarrassing reaction shots.

This may seem unfair, to base a major criticism on the performance of one who is not an actor, but if they're going to razzle dazzle these things up like show biz, They're going to have to be judged by the standards of show biz. A contrast

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in expertise was offered by Jonathan Miller on *his* pop science show, *The Body in Question*, which premiered a few days later.

Then NBC ran *Shogun* up the flagpole, which led to some thoughts about transferring the printed word to screen. There are definite similarities between the historical epic and science fiction film; in both cases, a whole new—or old—world has to be created, mostly by the designers of sets and costumes. This is not only a challenge, but costs a lot of money.

And then the viewer has to be drawn into a foreign—or alien, or future—society so that it becomes comprehensible. (This, obviously, doesn't apply to s/f properties set in the present, like *Body Snatchers*, but these problems certainly held back the production of many classic s/f novels set in a radically different environment. And I, for one, am getting tired of the more phantasmagorical of Texas shopping centers being used for futuristic sets.)

In any case, transferring *Shogun* to the screen served as a good example of what to expect if a major s/f novel is likewise handled. I think it's been pretty well proven that the mini-series form is the way to best serve a novel, but here it was too much of a good thing. The plot had that repetitious circularity I associate with Andre Norton novels, and the twelve hours seemed more like twelve days; my eyes began to glaze over after about the first week.

But this certainly wouldn't apply to works of such interior variety as *Dune* or *Childhood's End* or *Citizen of the Galaxy* (what a mini-series the last would make!), and certainly twelve hours would do them more justice, even on a small screen, than two or three on a large one.

CBS retaliated to *Shogun* with the TV premiere of *The Wiz*; it ran 2½ hours which also seemed like twelve days. I'd avoided *The Wiz* on stage *and* screen for the simple reason that I'm an old Oz hand; that leads me to even dislike the Garland *Wizard of Oz*, which is 1930s saccharine rather than the rather mad and sometimes quite brutal vision of L. Frank Baum. (I except Margaret Hamilton, the winged monkeys and the first sight of the Emerald City from that general negative view.)

The Wiz is even more of a horror. The musical elements—score, choreography, etc.— are both awful and interminable; as I noted last month about *Xanadu*, no one these days seems to have the vaguest idea of how to put a musical show together (yes, children, grandpa's going on about the good old days again, but some things *were* better then.

Even worse, the plot had been made *meaningful*; every song kept telling you to *try* and *do* and get down off your perch and up on your hind legs and all those things that supposedly make a useful member of society. Ugh. Baum's story was a *story*, for Heaven's sake, and a good one. That's one reason it has endured.

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I do have a kind word for the sets. I love New York, and the idea of transforming various parts of it into a stylized fantasy land (the walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge painted yellow, the Cowardly Lion being one of the stone ones in front of the New York Public Library) was rather wonderful. (I do find it unfortunate, though, that as the closing credits informed us, the Yellow Brick Road was created by Congoleum.)

Well, then, NBC riposted with *Revenge of the Stepford Wives.* The first SW film, you may remember, was about wives in a middle class suburb being roboticized into tidy, fluffy, flower-picking, good-in-bed "perfect mates." Filmmakers may have regarded it as a horror film, or alleogory—some of us suspected it was a documentary. In any case, it was worth seeing for only one thing—the performance of that funny lady Paula Prentiss, who can do no wrong.

I watched the new one because it has another funny lady in it—Julie Kavner (Brenda on *Rhoda*) who can also do no wrong. Even in this nonsense, the title of which tells it all, she was great to watch in essentially the same role as Prentiss's, that of the wife so *un*tidy that the conversion to a Stepford Wife gives the whole thing away. She can collapse me by merely saying "Wow."

As I write, the strike is over. *Now* maybe we'll get all those intelligent, original, beautifully filmed programs that each new season brings.

"Not too long ago I was speechless. Now I'm teaching Ben how to talk."

Donald Stevenson Benjamin Evans

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This sad and sensuous story is the first fiction sale for Jim Aikin, who writes: "I'm an editor at Contemporary Keyboard Magazine, a monthly for musicians. By training and inclination, I'm a musician myself, but I've turned increasingly to writing because I don't like the commercial compromises and lack of job security most musicians are compelled to live with."

The Lilith

BY

JIM AIKIN

There is no greater delight than to give delight, and no greater sorrow than not to.

—*Acanthos*

The man follows me up the carpeted stairs. Scented candles flicker in the silver wall sconces. He is a new man, lately arrived from the mountains in the East. I take him to Nanahli. She will want to hear his tales.

I hold the beaded curtain aside for him to enter. Nanahli rises to greet him, with a tiny hitch and a cock of the head as though surprised it is him. She comes forward daintily and offers her delicate hand with a shy smile. I step back into the alcove and wait to see whether I must bring them anything.

The man clutches his cap before him unsure what to do. She takes it from him, her large brown eyes never leaving his face. "Hello," she says in her warm, musical voice. He mumbles something. "I don't think we've met," she goes on.

"No, I've never—I mean, not—"

"My name's Nanahli. But call me Nani. Please?" She lowers her eyes demurely so the long silky lashes brush her glowing cheek.

"All right, Nani."

"I'd like it if you'd tell me what I should call you," she says, her glossy lips making tiny nibbling motions around the words.

"Arn."

"Oooh. All right, Arn. Would you like to come over here and sit beside me?" She takes his calloused hand in both of hers and leads him to the soft blue velvet couch. He eases his big frame into it awkwardly, staring at her hungrily and then looking away in confusion. She sits in one fluid motion, tucking one shapely leg under her and

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coming to rest with her thigh against his. She leans forward so her breasts push against the shimmering translucent fabric and brush his arm. "It's so nice to have you visit me, Arn."

He opens his mouth and closes it again.

She bites her finger coquettishly and wrinkles her nose at him. "Can I tell you a secret, Arn?"

"Sure. Yeah."

"I like strong, silent men. They make me feel so soft and vulnerable, just like a little kitten. Would you like to be strong with me, Arn? Would you like to protect me?"

"Yeah, I'd like to. Sure."

"Would you put your arm around me? Mmmmm. Now isn't that nice? I feel all warm and cuddly."

I slip gently out through the beaded curtain. Nanahli will not need me for some time.

Behind other curtains I hear low conversation, and the moaning of one who is in rapture. I descend the stairway, my cloth slippers noiseless on the carpet. Outside the front parlor I pause, as always, to make sure my black hood hangs well forward. None must see my face but those who live in the nest, until in three more months I become a lilith.

Three women and two men are waiting. Another nala, younger than I is serving them tea and spiced cakes. A nala brings down the man who was with Sherli and takes a woman up to her. I wait.

The silver bell that is Nanahli's tinkles, and I mount the stairs.

"Oh, thank you *so* much," she is saying to Arn. There is a throb of sincerity in her voice, as always. "You are very special to me now, Arn. Tell me you'll come again real soon."

"I'll come again soon," Arn replies. He sounds much surer of himself now.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I escort him to the head of the stairs. "Bye-bye, Arn," Nanahli calls. He looks back at her. Her body is silhouetted beneath the gauzy gown, and the strings of beads dangle around her shoulders and tangle between her legs. She sighs with satisfaction and blows him a kiss. He waves. She waves. We descend the stairs.

As he crosses the parlor, one of the women rises and comes toward me. "Is it Nani?" she asks.

"Yes. Come with me." I speak in a low, flat voice. I am not yet a lilith.

"Hello, Rena," Nanahli says.

"Hello, Nani."

"Have you been well?" Nanahli pours a violet liqueur from a decanter into two tiny crystal goblets. She offers one to Rena with a slight curtsy.

"Thank you, Nani. Yes, I'm all right." Rena sighs. "Clendon's back is bothering him again, and he's a trial to us all when that happens. And Jervoe ran away from the smith we sold him to, and I had to ride the coach clear down to Willerton to fetch him back.

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The ungrateful boy! We could have sold him to a ragman or a chimney sweep, but does he take account of that?"

"It must have been exciting," Nanahli says, gazing at Rena over the rim of her goblet.

"Exciting? What?"

"Going to Willerton."

"Oh, Willerton's no different than here, except they talk funny."

"But to travel like that."

"Well, it's all right, I suppose, if you like getting your insides jostled around for hours on end, and if you don't mind the dust, and if you're not worried about highwaymen. What I want to know is, why that smith couldn't send his *own* slave after the boy."

"You're always so conscientious, Rena. Always going out of your way to help others."

Rena smiles. "It's kind of you to say so, Nani."

"I only say it because it's true," Nanahli says, her eyes wide. "But you don't think enough of yourself, dearest. You should get a slave for yourself, to help lighten the load. You deserve so much more happiness."

"Only—it's hard to know what's best."

"There, there, darling, I know." Tenderly Nanahli strokes the woman's cheek. "Let's drink a toast, Rena. To your happiness." The little goblets clink. "Would it revive you if I rubbed your back?"

"Oh, would you?" Rena exclaims.

"I have some warm oil right here, sweetness. Just let me undo these buttons..." Nanahli slips the blouse from Rena's unresisting shoulders and begins stroking and caressing her, long enameled nails flicking feather-light across the woman's stiffening nipples. Rena closes her eyes and smiles, and Nanahli slides one arm around her shoulders and kisses her softly on the cheek.

Rena and Nanahli ignore me as I cross the room; I am only a nala. In the inner chamber I kneel before the great marble tub and draw the bath. I see myself, a hooded figure in a floor-length black robe, reflected in a dozen mirrors. Beside the tub I lay out the pastel soaps and the fluffy towels. After their love, the woman and the lilith will want to bathe.

Nanahli and Clili are sitting by the wide window with a table between them for pegs and dice. Nanahli stares out across the terrace at the tiled roofs of the town and at the sails of the ships in the harbor beyond. I am sitting away from the window, my hood thrown back, embroidering fine yellow flowers on a pair of silk panties.

"That makes three games you've lost, Nani," Clili says.

"I always lose," Nanahli sighs. "I'm not good at games." The odor of jasmine hangs in the still air.

"Shall we have a cuddle before lunch?" Clili asks.

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"Not right now, honeycomb. Why don't you cuddle with Asthenili instead?"

"All right." Clili minces over to me and lifts my head with her slim white hand. I lick her thumb and smile knowingly. "It must be hot under that robe," she breathes. "Why don't you stand up, and I'll help you out of it."

The robe falls to the floor. Clili stands very close to me, one arm around my neck and her other hand sliding confidently down my belly. Her perfume curls into my nostrils. I open my mouth and suck at the tip of her tongue, while my hand glides around to cup her smooth bottom.

"Oh, Nili," she gasps. "You've learned your lessons well!"

Arn of the mountains comes to Nanahli the next week, and twice more the week after. He is a free master in a mining and quarrying company, and for his tithe may come as often as he likes. Once over his shyness, he is a skillful lover. When I am not needed elsewhere I watch from the alcove, and I see him ready Nanahli with his mouth and fingers to receive his thrusts. She takes him into her with little gulps and moans of joy, and her fingers knead his back urgently.

After he has gone, I bring a woman to take what he has given. Nanahli's own organ, thinner and more supple than a man's, uncurls from its pouch, and she gives the woman Arn's seed, now quickened with her juices. I tingle as I watch, for this is the glory of the lilith—to take love from whoever offers it and pass it on to whoever calls for it.

Thus are we called the slaves of love. We cannot be bought and sold like men and women, yet all may command us. And why should we refuse? It is an exquisite joy to love; yet beyond this, we are not merely slaves but masters as well. For no woman or man can resist a lilith. To look upon a lilith's face is to feel the fever that is past taming. To look upon *my* face.

Arn is sitting on the edge of the bed. Nanahli snuggles in a mound of lavender sheets, tracing aimless patterns with her fingers on his broad naked back. "Tell me what it's like in the mountains," she says.

"Life is hard. Not like here."

"Are the liliths in the mountains as pretty as me?"

"Got no liliths in the mountains."

"No liliths? But what did you do when you needed love?"

"Got along without."

"Oh, how awful!" Nanahli shudders. "And no little children, either. How sad."

"There was a few children. Not many."

"But that's impossible! How can there be children without a lilith? Oh, you're teasing me! That's naughty."

"Women went down to the valley sometimes, to a lilith. Men did too, I

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guess. Long trip, though. Not many children."

"I thought for a minute you were telling me...you know."

"What?"

"Telling me that in the mountains there were men and women who...you know. Who...did it with each other."

Arn blushes. "I'm no pervert," he declares.

"I know you're not, honey. Ooh, do I ever! Hey." She runs her tongue across her upper teeth. "C'mere." She wriggles so her breasts sway invitingly.

My head swims. I feel I may faint. Men and women without a lilith! I have never heard such a thing before. Surely it is impossible. How would they become aroused?

Later, Nanahli calls me to help her prepare to retire for the night. I lay out the cerise nightgown with the white fur trim and unstrap her high-heeled sandals. She sits at the clear glass dressing table brushing her soft brown hair to a sheen.

"Arn isn't like the others," she muses.

"How do you mean?"

"He's strong, and he's—kind of simple. City people are always worrying about so many complicated things. Compared to them, Arn is like half a person. It's almost like there's something missing from his life. But when he holds me, it's just the other way round: he has more to give. He really is a very good lover. Sometimes my arms seem to be opening for him by themselves. I wish he'd come more often."

"I don't like him," I say.

"Oh, Nili, why not?"

"He was talking about..." I can't make myself say it.

"About what, love lips?"

"About—men and women—with each other."

"Nili, for shame! You mustn't talk about such awful things!"

"But—how do they do it?" I persist. "Does one of them pretend to be a lilith?"

"Nili, that's filthy talk! You must never, never talk about such things. I'm ashamed of you, and very, very shocked. If I hear, from anybody, that you have spoken a word more about such—unnatural things, I'll have to speak to Zhenuli about putting off your initiation rites until you learn to act more adult. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-yes."

"I hope so. Now go to your room at once."

I flee to my bare little chamber, sobbing. I have never seen Nani so upset. All unknowing, I have done a grave wrong. I begin to feel strangely toward her, as though I would like to tear at her with my hands and turn her soft smile to a scream of pain. With a shiver I realize what I am thinking. This must be the emotion called hate, which no lilith must ever feel. I put it from me. As I grow calm, I realize Nanahli is right. For a lilith to love, she must know her love is returned. If she

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worries that out beyond the walls of the nest men and women are doing vile, unspeakable things with one another, how can she love them? Thus even the thought of such things has no place in a lilith's mind. If a lilith thought for a moment that her love was unnecessary to her lovers, it would falter in her breast, and die.

I resolve to put all such thoughts away from me forever, so I can be a good lilith. With this, I compose myself for sleep.

Two nights later Arn is back. I do not attend while they are loving; I must serve cocoa and butter cookies in the front parlor. One by one the people go up the stairs to visit Zhenuli or Falweli or Clili or one of the others. But those whose favorite is Nanahli continue to wait. I climb the stairs and pause to listen outside the beaded curtain.

"I've seen the lovely brick roads through the mountain in our picture books," Nanahli is saying.

Arn snorts. "What roads? Goat paths, more like. It's a shame you bein' cooped up in here, not knowin' anything but what's in a picture book. I'd like to show you the mountains for real."

"I'd like it if you could," she sighs.

There is a silence. I am just about to step through the beaded curtain when Arn says, "Before, when you asked about men and women in the mountains—"

"Uh-huh?"

"I heard stories. Don't see how they could be true. Don't see how anybody could do a thing like that."

I am shivering.

"Do what?" Nanahli asks.

"He calls her 'wife' and she calls him 'husband.' And the two of them, they seal an oath to...to...only to love...with each other. Not with a lilith."

"Why would anybody want to—ugh. Have you ever gotten big without a lilith?"

"No. No. Not me. I'm just sayin'...other people. Don't know. You're all I ever need or want, Nani. You're—special. How could I want a woman, a wife, when I got you?"

"You're special to me too, Arn." I hear the rustling of cloth and the tiny wet sounds of kissing. "What is it, papa bear?" she asks.

"D'you ever...No. Forget it."

"What? You can tell me, Arn. I'm your lovely little lilith."

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Arn! You've got something special you'd like to do, don't you, something that'll make you really, really hot. But you're afraid if you tell me, I won't want to. You can tell me, though. I'll do anything if it'll make you happy. Anything. Just whisper it to me. I know, would you like me to put my finger up inside your—"

"It's nothing like that."

"Oh, honey, you're serious, aren't you? C'mon, tell me. You can tell me.

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Whatever it is, it's okay. I promise."

"Well...d'you ever do pretend? Like make believe something's so when it isn't?"

"Sometimes, sure. Let's see, there's master and slave, and there's mamma and baby. I have some virgin priestess robes I could wear. Once in a while—I'm not supposed to tell you this unless you ask for it—I put on a hooded robe and pretend I'm a nala. Is that what you want?"

"No, not that. The other thing. The...wife thing. Husband and wife. Could we pretend I'm the husband and you're the wife?"

I feel sure I am going to vomit. I want to burst into the room to save Nani from this obscenity, but my limbs will not obey me.

I hear her saying, "If it'll make you happy, of course we'll do it." Her voice is shaky. "I don't know much about wifing, though. Can you show me what you want?"

"It's nothing special. It's not doing anything special. It's just—being special. To one another. Not like you are with anybody else."

"But you *are* special, Arn. I told you that already. I thought you knew that."

"No, not like that. Everybody's special to you, Nani. You're a lilith. I mean different. Like you and me were—like there was nobody else in the whole world you wanted to be with the way you wanted to be with me. Like I was the only one."

"But, Arn, I can't—I can't not love people. I'm a lilith. I can't stop loving, and people can't stop loving me."

"Well, all right, then. Maybe what I mean is like—like I'm going to take you away with me to see the mountains. Wouldn't that make me special?"

"But I can never go to the mountains, Arn. You know that. If I went out in the street, people would fight with one another to be near me. And I wouldn't be able to stop myself from loving them, all of them, right there in the street. I'd die of exhaustion or go mad!"

"We could leave in the dead of night, in a closed carriage."

"Poor Arn. It's impossible. Really."

"I know. Maybe it is. I just thought that was a way you could think what I meant by special. If I was the one who was going to take you away, you'd feel different toward me than you did toward anybody else. and pretending we could go away to the mountains would make you happy, just the way pretending we're husband and wife would make me happy. Now do you see? Oh, forget it! Forget I said anything."

"No, Arn, I won't forget it. If it's important to you for us to pretend that I'm your—your wife, then that's what we'll do. C'mere. Husband. C'mere, you great big hunk of husband, you."

I can stand no more. I run, dashing down the stairs two at a time, nearly forgetting to pull my hood forward before I reach the parlor. It is deserted but for two still waiting for Nanahli.

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Controlling my voice with an effort, I tell them, "Nani is not feeling well, and she can see no one else tonight. I can see whether there are other liliths free, or you can return tomorrow."

"Clili, can I ask you a question?"

Clili's hand stops its lazy prowl along my leg. "It must be important," she pouts, "to distract you from playing with me."

"It is, kind of. What would you do if you saw somebody coming to see a lilith that you knew had a bad effect on her?"

"Well, who is it, dearest? Who are you talking about? I know nobody's having a bad effect on *me.*"

"I'm not talking about anybody in particular. It was just a question. Because in two months I'm going to be a lilith, and so I should learn how to be mature and deal with problems, in case anything bad ever happened."

"Nothing bad is going to happen, sweet cakes."

"But if it did. What would you do?"

"What would I do about what?"

Now it's my turn to pout. Clili doesn't have a very long memory. "If somebody was coming to see a lilith that was bad, bad for her."

"Well, gee, I suppose I'd talk with her about it."

"But what if you couldn't? What if she'd forbidden you to talk about it?"

"Then I guess I'd try to figure out a way to get whoever it was to stop coming, without telling the lilith what I was doing."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Mmm," Clili mumbles. "Did anybody ever tell you you had the cutest little—"

"Ooh! Oh, Clili, harder, harder!"

She stops "Say, puss, there isn't anything really the matter, is there?"

"No, it was just a question. No. Oh ——ohhh—"

At first I think I will tell Arn when he comes that Nanahli doesn't want to see him, and tell her he hasn't asked for her. But then I think, what if they get together again after? They will talk, and Nanahli is sure to guess who it was that lied to Arn. I will be punished, and they will go back to seeing one another. So I think of a better plan. There is risk in it for me, but my desire to help Nani is greater than my fear.

When Arn comes, I take him to a chamber not being used by a lilith. "Stay here," I tell him. "Nanahli will come to you." I go into the inner chamber, take off my robe, and put on satin panties and a halter with fringe all around it, and lovely high shoes. Quickly I shade my eyelids green and rouge my lips and cheeks.

"Hello," I tell him in my prettiest voice. "You must be Arn."

"Who are you? Where's Nani?"

"Nani's tummy was upset tonight, so she asked me to take care of you. I think I'm gonna like taking care of

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you. My name's Asthenili, but everybody calls me Nili." I sit down beside him and run my hand along his leg. My stomach is all butterflies, but it never shows. I know just how to act. I lick my lower lip. "Would you like to play with me?"

He takes my head roughly in one hand and draws me to him. I open my mouth to his kiss. His hand finds my breasts. My heart races at the exquisite sensations as I wind an arm around his neck and pull him down on top of me. "Oh, Arn, Arn!" I croon, deftly working to free him from his trousers.

When he is spent, I nibble playfully at his ear. "Nani was right about you," I whisper. "You're *extra* special." He sighs contentedly. I am bathed in a glow of feelings for Arn. I yearn to be with him again and again—but then I remember what an unnatural monster he is with his talk of wifing Nani, and I harden my heart. "Shall I tell you what you've just done, sweet meat?" I add, giving his ear a nip.

"What?" he says lazily.

"You've just made love with a nala."

His body jerks. He stares at me. "You're no nala."

"Sure I am, honey lamb. Look, I'll show you." I hop up from the bed and run into the inner chamber, not forgetting to wiggle my little bottom at him. I come back with my robe and put it on for him, leaving the hood back so he can see my halo of blond hair. "You've just made love with a nala," I tell him again. "And if anybody asks me, I'll say you made me do it. You know what they'll do then." I giggle. "They'll ride you down to the square and chop your head off. And we'll all get to come watch."

His face is white. "But you're not a nala. You're a full-grown lilith."

"Not till next month. I'm only fifteen."

"Why? Why'd you do this to me?"

"I want you to stop seeing Nani. You're bad for her. If you swear you'll never come to see her ever again, I won't tell anybody how you pulled me in here and tore off my robe and ravished me."

"You're an evil child," he says vindictively.

"I'm not a child! I'll be a lilith next month. And you're the one that's evil." I pull the hood over my head. "Put your pants on," I tell him in my colorless nala voice. "I'll take you downstairs."

As one week and then another passes, Nanahli becomes strangely silent. She will not play at games, or cuddle, or read through the picture books with us. She only stares out the window. She picks at her food, and in the mornings her sheets are tumbled into knots. Watching from the alcove, I see that her loving has grown clumsy. She laughs too readily and at the wrong things, or else she forgets to speak. Her lovers as they leave lack the vague, melted look by which a lilith

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sees her arts mirrored. I hear one of them say next time he will try somebody new.

It saddens me to see Arn's hateful ideas about husbands and wives so prey on her mind, but at first I assume the mood will pass as her memories of their times together dim. But her strangeness feeds on itself instead of abating. She sits at the dressing table dejected, the silver hairbrush trailing from her fingers. "Nili pet," she says, "do you know what happens to a lilith, inside, when she fears she is no longer loved?"

"But you are loved, Nani! If only you could stop brooding and cheer up."

She sighs. "I wish—oh, I don't know. Sometimes I wish I weren't a lilith at all."

"Not a lilith!" I exclaim. "What an awful thing. You're special, Nani. Don't you want to be special?"

"Oh, yes, dear, more than anything. But wouldn't it be lovely to be able to leave the nest and travel far away and see things?"

"I can't think why."

"No, I don't suppose you can. You're a good, simple nala, Nili, and you'll make a delectable lilith."

I blush. "I hope so, Nani."

"I'm sure you will, cupcake. You'll never have to worry about—"

"About what?"

"Oh, about lots of things."

I pretend not to understand what she is talking about, but I can see the poison Arn planted in her spreading and taking root. She is imagining she is his wife! I love Nanahli dearly, and I want desperately to help her get over this terrible affliction, so she can love and be loved again. Separating them hasn't worked; I will have to bring them together again so she can discover how terrible a person he really is.

I hide at the garden gate all one morning, properly hooded, until I see a lad passing by. I hiss at him, and he comes close. I give him a silver penny and tell him to take a message to Arn, saying, "You may see her. I will tell no tales." I make the lad repeat this twice and send him on his way.

Then I find Galeli and Uwili in the kitchens and draw them aside. They share with me the duty of conducting visitors upstairs, and they are both only thirteen and will do as I say.

"Nanahli is not well," I tell them. They are dismayed. "It's nothing serious, and it will pass in a few weeks. She is too proud to tell the liliths, but I am her special friend, so she asked me to help her. For two or three weeks, we must see that she has no visitors. If a man or woman asks for her, we are to say she is with somebody else. We are to persuade the visitor to see another lilith.

"On no account," I continue, "are we to tell anybody Nanahli is ill. No liliths, no visitors, and none of the other nalas. In fact, she would be very embarrassed if she knew you two

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knew. She asked me to screen her visitors by myself, but I cannot do it without your help. So even if she should question you whether anyone has asked for her, you must tell her no. She may seem upset, but you must understand this is only her illness, and with your help she will soon be cured. Can you do this?"

"Yes, Nili." "Yes."

"There is one visitor she must have: Arn. When Arn comes, show him to her at once. He has the medicine for her illness. But neither must you let him know you know of it, for they would be very angry at me if they knew I had told you."

That night Arn comes. I am not worried that he will tell Nani about what I did with him—it means his head if he speaks of it. But I listen to them anyway. I must hear the poisonous course of his fantasies if I am to drive the wedge between them and so save her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner, Nani. I was called away to the north on business."

"That's right, you haven't been around, have you? I've been so busy I hardly noticed."

"I missed you, Nani."

Her voice softens. "I missed you too, Arn. I missed you terribly. After last time I kept thinking maybe someday you *would* take me with you to the mountains. But then you didn't come and didn't come, and I started being scared that you were—ashamed by what we talked about before, and you might *never* come back. Sweet Arn!"

"Then you don't mind?"

"Arn, any time you want me to pretend I'm your wife, I'd love to."

"Oh, Nani."

"Oooh, Arn!"

Arn stays the night, and the next night he is back and stays again. Again I contrive to overhear them. After they have loved, Arn grows talkative. "I met an old man one time, wandering on the road," he says. "He was half crazy, and he told the craziest stories I ever heard."

"What kind of stories?" Nanahli asks, exactly as any lilith would.

"Oh, all kinds of craziness. He said people didn't always live here, in this world. He said we came here a long time ago from somewhere else. From the stars, he said, but I don't see how that could be. Anyway, he said something else too, which is why I thought of it just now. He said there was a time, when we first came here, when there was only men and women, and no liliths at all."

"What nonsense!"

"I'm only saying what he said. He said the first people here looked around and saw how there were males and females and lilas of all the animals and they saw how much sense that made; so they fixed themselves up somehow so there would be human lilas too. Only they didn't do it quite right, and that's why all the animals

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have just as many lilas as males and females, but with people only one baby in a hundred is a lilith. He even said that's why dogs and cats and horses and sheep only have males and females—because we brought them with us from this other place."

"How could they fix themselves up to have lila babies, if they didn't? I don't understand."

"I asked him that. He didn't know. He said that when people first came here they knew how to do lots of things. But afterwards the bridge, or whatever it was, that led from here to the place they came from, got cut off; so they forget how to do lots of things."

"I don't believe a word of it." But she curls herself around him, and I see that her heart believes more than her head. How can she entertain such poisonous ideas? I wait impatiently for her to tire of him, but I begin to lose hope.

The next night he does not come. Nanahli waits in the upstairs parlor, humming a little tune, but as the hour grows late she calls to me.

"Nili, hasn't anybody asked for me tonight?"

"No, Nani. It's been a very quiet night."

"I suppose so." She stares out the window for a long time before she goes to bed.

The next night Arn comes but leaves early. When I have let him out I return to Nanahli's chamber. "Is there a woman downstairs for me to give Arn's juices to?" she asks, powdering her nose.

I shake my head.

"No? But there must be. Nili, there's something wrong. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"People no longer ask for you. It began when you were sick and couldn't love them well enough. Or they ask for you, but you are with Arn the whole night. Now they whisper to one another, 'Nani doesn't care for us—any more.'"

"But I do care for them. I do!"

"You still have Arn," I point out.

"Sweet Arn." She hugs herself. "He still loves me, even if the others don't."

"But you're a lilith!" I blurt. "You need more than one lover. And you deserve more! How can Arn by himself ever make you happy?"

"Maybe he can't, Nili. But he's all I have, it seems."

At first Arn's returning has brought a bloom to her cheek, but as the days go by she becomes tense and withdrawn. At table a goblet slips from her hand and shatters on the floor. She wanders the halls at night, listening to the sounds of pleasure coming from other rooms, smelling the thick musk of love. Surely, I think, now she will realize that she needs more than one lover and will renounce Arn and his madness. But when he comes she clings to him, and when he must go she cries.

* * *

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I overhear Nanahli talking to Clili.

"I'm frightened, Clili. Something is wrong."

"What is it, sweet puss?"

"Nobody comes to see me any more."

"Oh, that's impossible. You're imagining it."

"No, I'm not."

"Arn comes to see you, doesn't he?"

"Dear Arn. He still loves me. But he's the only one. Last night Arn didn't come, and I had nobody. Nobody at all."

"Well, there must be a mistake, because I had two new ones last night. I'll talk to Nili about it."

"Oh, would you? I'd appreciate it so much."

Later, Clili draws me aside.

"You brought me two new ones last night, didn't you, Nili?"

"Oh, no. I only brought you one."

"Well, then Uwili or Galeli must have brought the other. Anyway, Nani didn't have anybody last night. You should have taken her both the new ones."

"Oh, yes, I should have, shouldn't I? But I thought she had somebody with her."

"No, there was nobody with her. Nili, haven't Nani's regular people been coming to see her?"

I frown in concentration. "Not so many lately, no. But some of them still come. A couple have asked to see other liliths."

"Did they say why?"

"Not really. I suppose they just wanted some variety. But maybe they were being considerate. Nani hasn't been feeling well lately, and maybe they didn't want to disturb her."

"Mmm, you're right. I expect she should take it easy. But if nobody asks for her, do send her a new one. It'll cheer her up."

"I will, Clili. I promise."

A fat little man named Sul comes. He demands to see Nanahli. She is his favorite, and no other will do. He is a difficult man to love—awkward, intractable, and quick to anger. I search for a way to put him off, but then I think, no, this is perfect. Nanahli will be so grateful to see him, surely she will realize how precious even the least of her lovers is. And even if loving Sul doesn't bring her to her senses, I will have him to point to if Clili questions me again.

I leave him in her chamber and go hunt for her. I find her on the terrace, watching a waning moon rise.

"There is one within who calls for your love."

"Arn?"

"No. Sul."

"Sul? Sul wants my love?" She laughs. The laugh has an edge in it. "I have hardly bothered to dress. Tell him I will be with him shortly."

For a long time she doesn't ring for

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me to bring Sul downstairs. At last I go to see what they are doing.

She is on her knees before him, hugging him desperately, her eyes squeezed shut and her forehead damp with sweat. His organ dangles at a disheartening angle. "Oh, honey," she moans, "it's so *good* with you."

He pushes her away. "What's the matter with you, Nani?" he whines.

"Oh. Nothing. Nothing, Sul. I—oh—" She bursts into tears, and lurching to her feet she rushes from the room.

"I don't get it," he grumbles as he fumbles at his trousers.

"Nani is disturbed," I tell him. "Gravely disturbed."

"I'll say." He glares at the door of the inner chamber. "I never heard of no damn lilith couldn't even get a guy hot." He stomps out.

When I have taken Sul downstairs, I go to draw Nanahli's bath, but the door of the inner chamber is bolted, and she doesn't answer my knock.

The next night is Arn again. I am baffled and angry: my strategy hasn't worked. I was sure her failure to arouse Sul would awaken her to what Arn is doing to her. Now there is only one thing more I can try.

Again I wait by the garden gate. This time the message I send is to Sul. "Come to the nest tonight," the message runs. "One who wishes you ten thousand sweetnesses must speak with you."

He arrives looking furtive and uneasy. I make sure I am the one to escort him upstairs. We go to the empty chamber.

"You saw how disturbed Nani is," I tell him.

He nods rapidly, not looking happy. "Yeah, I saw."

"We here in the nest are concerned for her. We love Nani deeply, and we have spent many hours discussing the best way to help her. We have a plan, but we need you to make it work properly. Are you willing to help?"

"Yeah. I guess so, yeah."

"Hers is a disease of pride," I explain. "And because of the pride, she cannot admit she is ill, or ask for help."

"I guess that'd make things worse."

"You're very wise. She has embraced an idea—a very harmful idea. It is an idea so vile I would not even mention it to you if your help were not needed to cure her of it."

"An *idea* done this to her?"

"Yes. Nani has become fascinated by the idea that she can love some, and not others."

"Hunh?"

"She believes that liliths should choose to love only a few of the people that come to them and turn the others away."

"Well, that's not right!"

"You're very wise. It is a very harmful idea. If men and women could not turn to the liliths for love, they would grow frustrated, and resentful, and desperate. Slaves might refuse to

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honor their masters or even murder them in their sleep."

Sul fingers his throat in alarm. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nani must be made to understand how important it is that she love all her people. I want you to gather as many as you can of those who have been her lovers for years. I will give you names. Bring them all here tomorrow night, and I will take you all up to see her."

"But what are we gonna do then?"

"I have thought about this—that is, the liliths have all discussed it. You could simply tell her that you all love her dearly, but she is so sunk in her depravity that this is unlikely to work. What you must do instead is confront her with her own lack of love. Say to her, 'We have heard you no longer love us. We must know the truth.' Demand that she declare her love for you. You must be firm, for otherwise you will not reach her."

"Okay. I can do that."

"One thing more. You must tell no one I have spoken with you. If this became known, her pride would surely stop her tongue. No, you must tell everyone that bringing them together is your own idea. Tell them you have seen Nani's lack of love—as indeed you, Sul, have. Tell them they must help you save her by demanding that she declare her love for you."

"It sounds kinda crazy. Are you sure it'll work?"

"Trust me, Sul. I know Nani, and I know the nature of what afflicts her."

"Okay, if you say so. We'll give it a try."

Sul proves to be a persuasive conspirator. He arrives with nearly thirty men and women. They murmur and shuffle as Uwili and I escort them upstairs.

Nananli is not in her room. I tap on the door of the inner chamber and hear a muffled "Come in."

She is sitting on a low stool, her hair in disarray and her eyes smeary. She looks up at me like a hunted animal.

"A group of your lovers is outside," I tell her. "Sul has brought them."

"Sul? Wh-why? What do they want? Tell them to go away."

"They are your lovers, Nani. You cannot tell them to go away."

"But I don't—what do they want?"

"To speak with you."

"But why? About what?"

"You will have to find out from them."

She inspects herself absently in the mirror, brushing back a lock of hair that immediately flops forward again. She takes a deep breath, drawing herself up with an effort, and opens the door.

She looks left and right at the circling faces. "Hello," she says. "It's so n-nice of you all to come and visit me. It's been so long since I've seen—Hello, Sul. Is there anything—"

There is an awkward silence. Sul

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seems unwilling to break it.

"We heard you don't love us any more," a big raw-boned man says.

A cry escapes the lilith's throat.

"We come to find out the truth."

"But I do love you. I love you all dearly. How can you think such a thing?"

"We heard you didn't love Sul so good."

"Oh, but that was a—an accident, a mistake. I don't know what went wrong. Maybe there was something—Sul, have you been to see a doctor?"

"There's nothin' wrong with me, Nani. It's you."

"But you can't know that, can you? I'm *sure* that's the problem. You'd better see a doctor, Sully. I wouldn't want one of my—it must be that. I don't have any trouble when I'm with Arn."

"So you can love this Arn, but not Sul," says a nervous-looking woman.

"Yes! I mean no! Oh, I don't know what I mean. I don't feel well. Couldn't we talk about this later?"

"I don't get it, Nani," the big man says. "It sounds to me like you want to love some of us, but not others. I'm not sure I like that."

"Oh, no, it's not true! I love you all! Can't you see that? How can you accuse me of such a thing? Don't you trust me?"

"Do you trust her, Sul?"

"After the other night? No way."

"Oh, but you must!" Nanahli's breath comes ragged and shallow. "I'll make it up to you, Sul, I promise. Next time I'll love you like you were the only man in the world! I mean—oh! I'm sorry I couldn't love you last time, Sul. There's something wrong with me. I—I don't know what it is, but I just couldn't love you. Why are you all staring at me like that? Please don't. I can't stand it! Stop looking at me. Stop! Go away. I don't want you looking at me. Oh, please go away, I don't like you, you're all mean to me, go away, I hate you! I hate you! Ohhh!" Her face is twisted ugly. She stumbles hurriedly from the room, sobbing.

I am appalled by the depth to which Nani has sunk. All my efforts have failed. "I am sorry," I tell them. "As you can see, Nani is very ill. Thank you for trying to help, but there is nothing more you can do here. We will call a doctor to attend her. I am sorry you had to see her like this."

Clili sees them in the hall as they are filing out. She draws me aside. "What were they all doing up here?" she wants to know. "You know it's not allowed—"

"They came to show their love for Nani," I explain, "because they heard she was ill. But she was hysterical. She told them she hated them."

"Oh, how awful! Why would she do a thing like that?"

"She is gravely ill. We must send for a doctor."

"Yes, at once. I'll take care of it, Nili. You go be with her."

I am expecting to find Nanahli

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prostrate, but, though agitated, she seems lucid enough. She is trying on a voluminous fawn-colored cape. Suede moccasin-foot boots peek from beneath it.

"Nili, thank God you've come. Can you do something for me?"

"Anything, Nani."

"You must find someone to carry a message to Arn."

"What message?" I am no longer surprised at the obstinacy of her madness.

"Tell him he must meet me by the garden gate as quick as he can, and bring a closed carriage. Tell him the time has come for us to flee to the mountains."

"But, Nani—" I protest.

"Do as I say, Nili, like a good nala. And hurry!"

"But, Nani, how can you go away? Everybody here loves you! And you love everybody! Don't you? Don't you?"

"I don't know, Asthenili. I used to think so. But after—I just don't know."

"Nani, you have to love everybody! If you don't, you're—you're a traitor as a lilith!"

"Poor Nili. You're such a dear, uncomplicated child! If only things were that simple. I wanted to be a good lilith, Nili, but somehow something got in the way. I don't even know what it was. But it's too late now. After tonight, nobody will ever be able to love me again. Nobody but Arn. Run find somebody to fetch him, Nili. Hurry!"

There are tears in my eyes as I go down the stairs. To have her snatched away past all hope of curing! I decide I can't allow it to happen.

I find a woman who is just leaving and ask her to take a message to Arn. "The message is this: 'The child has told all. You must flee. Do not expect me to come with you. The time for pretending is past. My love is here. I have been your lilith, but no more.'"

Nanahli sits at her dressing table, wrapped in the traveling cloak. The candles burn lower. I can think of nothing to say to her.

The doctor comes, a gaunt gray-haired woman. "Now, then, what seems to be the trouble?"

"No trouble," Nanahli answers her. "The trouble all is done with now."

"Are you sure, my dear? There is no pain?"

"Quite sure. I have no need for a doctor."

The doctor looks at her doubtfully. "Is there something—not physical, perhaps? Some strain you have been under, or a confusion in your mind?"

"No. I am past all that."

The doctor shakes her head. "For now I will believe you. But I will come again in the morning, when we can talk. If you should have trouble sleeping, put this powder in a glass of water and drink it. It is tasteless and acts quickly."

"I shan't need it, but thank you."

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The doctor leaves. Nanahli sends me to the side gate to see whether Arn has come. I return and tell her there is nobody there. The candles burn lower. Clili comes, and Zhenuli, and they sit with Nanahli, but she answers them in calm monosyllables, and soon they go away. She sends me to the gate again. Again I report nothing. The candles burn lower.

"What can be keeping him?" she frets.

"Perhaps he does not mean to come."

"Oh, Nili, how can you say such a thing? He will come! He must. It cannot be long now. Nili, run down to the gate and wait there, so you can bring him the moment he comes."

I go downstairs and shiver under the stars, but of course Arn does not come. Tiring of the pretense, at length I return to Nanahli.

"He has come!" she cries. It saddens me to see the joy in her eyes.

"No."

"Then why have you come back? Why are you not still waiting?"

"He sent a message."

"He did? What is it? What is it?"

"He says he will not come. He says he doesn't care what becomes of you. He says you should expect never to see him again."

"Oh!" Her face is drained of color, and she clutches at herself. "Did he say why?"

"No."

She rises unsteadily and walks in circles around the room, as though blind. The cloak slips unheeded from her shoulders. She wanders, picking up small objects and setting them down. I sit and watch her.

"If Arn does not love me," she says in a low voice, "then there is nobody I can love. I am so tired, Nili. Draw my bath."

"I will bring you some cocoa, too."

"Yes, please."

I grieve as I draw the steaming water. Everything I have tried to do to help Nani has come to nothing. She admits she can love nobody. For a lilith, there can be no greater tragedy. I cannot bear the thought of her living out her life in such desolation and pain. A lilith who cannot love is a pitiful thing.

And as she sinks deeper into melancholy, who knows what trouble she might stir up in the nest with her wild fancies? She might infect all the liliths with the madness for husbanding and wifing. Or (I tremble at the thought) she might say something that caused my deceptions of the past weeks to become known. My reasons were the best, but that might be impossible to explain.

I love Nani dearly, but I know what must be done. The thought frightens me, makes a queer hot queasiness come into my stomach, but I concentrate on being cold and hard till it goes away.

I put the doctor's sleeping powder into the cocoa and set the cup on the little table by the tub. Her eyes are

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closed already, but she opens them to reach out and take the cup. Steam rises up and darkens the tendrils of her hair.

She finishes the cup and sets it down. "That was good, Nili," she says. "Thank you."

I wait until I see her features relax. "Nani, Nani," I call softly. She does not respond. "Nani," I say more loudly.

She is asleep. Almost I think I cannot do it, but I take a deep breath, lean over the tub and place one hand on each of her shoulders. Then I push down until her head is beneath the water.

She breathes out bubbles, and in a moment her whole body convulses. I tighten my arms to keep her under. I feel a hot surge of triumph as I remember how hateful she was to me. But, no, that is unimportant. What I am doing is an act of kindness to one in hopeless pain. I must make myself feel not triumph but regret.

Soon she is still. Now she need not suffer any more. I rise and dry my hands. They are shaking, but only a little.

In the outer chamber I hear footsteps. "Nani?" It is Arn's voice. I move to the door. "Nani, where are you? I had to come. I don't care—you!"

I slip out the door and shut it behind me. "Nanahli doesn't wish to be disturbed," I tell him coldly.

"Where is she? I have to talk to her."

"Go away. Nobody wants you here. Unless," I add with a smile, "you'd like to forget about Nani and go somewhere quiet with me." Suddenly, I want desperately for him to agree to this. More, I want him to take *me* away to the mountains. My desire is so strong it dizzies me. "Arn," I begin.

But his face remains clouded with anger. I see that I am being a fool. Arn has no love for me. "I'm going to talk with her," he persists.

"No, you're not." I laugh.

"You're not going to stop me."

"Nobody's going to stop you, but all the same you're *not* going to talk with her." I laugh some more. I can't seem to stop laughing.

He grabs me by the shoulders, and my body fills with yearning and loathing. "Where is she?" he snaps. "Is something the matter?"

"Let go of me. She's in there."

He throws me aside and opens the door. It is clear to me what I must do. In his grief Arn may blurt out that I seduced him—and from this Clili and Zhenuli might guess that it is I who drowned Nanahli. I have no other choice: from the dressing table I snatch up a long narrow metal pin, of the kind used to hold elaborate hair arrangements together.

"Nan—oh, my God!" He rushes to the tub and clutches at her body. I am right behind him. I push the pin into his back, in the middle of the left side.

He twists toward me as he falls into the tub. Now his head is under water too, and his eyes are open, but no bub-

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bles are coming from his mouth. His legs hang over the side of the tub. His blood begins to muddy the water.

I turn away from them and stand for several minutes, until I can stop trembling. My head is a storm of feelings, but I know they aren't right—the thoughts I am thinking can't be true, they don't belong to me. So I make myself cold and hard again, until there are no thoughts at all in my head. No, none. No thoughts. No.

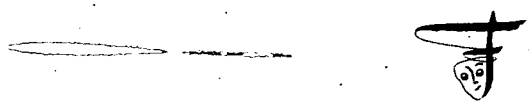
When I am calm, I run screaming into the hall. The liliths come sleepily from their chambers, knotting the belts of their soft dressing gowns, their hair all pillow-tousled. I tell them I surprised Arn drowning Nanahli and stabbed him to try to stop him.

I show them the bath. They weep.

For three weeks there is sorrow in the nest. It ends on the night I am welcomed as a lilith. The robe I wore as a nala is burned, and there are solemn rituals and initiations. When it is done, I retire to the chamber that was Nanahli's, and now is mine. I sit at the dressing table, naked on the white satin stool. The mirror shows my slim, flawless body, the delicate curve of neck and shoulders, the rose-tipped breasts. I am sad that Arn will never again look upon my body. If only there had been time to reason with him, he need not have died. I could have made him happy, I am sure if it—happier by far than he could ever have been with Nani.

But it is too late now to think about such things. I take up the silver hairbrush and brush my hair till it falls in glossy waves. I dip a finger into a milky glass jar and spread the sparkling blue powder smoothly on my eyelids. From another jar I dip the rouge for my lips.

I ring the tiny silver bell and a hooded nala enters. "I am ready for my underthings," I tell her. "Tonight, I think, the fine white lace, with pink satin ribbons." She moves to the wardrobe. "Tonight," I whisper, "tonight, *love!*"



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In the July 1980 issue, Mr. Griffin's tale about the demise of Flo of Upper Blooton cured us all of the nasty habit of poking forks into toasters. Time now for another lesson, and a sad one it is.

THE REVOLTING TALE OF HEEDLESS JACK WHO STEPPED UPON THE SIDEWALK CRACKS

Divers Exempla for the Enlightenment, Edification, and Instruction of the Young, Rendered into Poetical Form with Uplifting and Cautionary Morals Appended.

Despite repeated warnings, Jack
Resolved to step on every crack;
And when he'd finished, saw, by chance,
Inside a passing ambulance,
Mama, who, unaccountably,
Had thirty fractured vertebrae.

A clinic spokesman showed the Press
The X-Rays, adding, "We would guess
It's Filio-Fissural-Vertebral Trauma
We've got in this delinquent's Mamma."
(Which means Jack's stepping on each crack
Had caused his mother's spinal frac-
Ture.)

When he found his mother's bed,
He kissed her counter-weighted head
"Mama," he begged, "forgive me, please."
She lay in deepest thought awhile,
Then with a vague, seraphic smile,
Though stretched by pulleys, trussed and wired,
She cursed him roundly and expired.

With effort, staff psychiatrists
Stopped him from slashing both his wrists
And told him (kneeling on his chest)
His guilt was only rage repressed
From viewing lewd Entr'acts between
Some Encores to the Primal Scene.

But frankly, as I'm sure you see,
He was as guilty as could be.
So shun the cracks, with caution stride,
Or end, like Jack, a matricide.

—RUSSELL M. GRIFFIN

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Charles Sheffield ("The Marriage of True Minds," November 1980) is back with a tale about an intriguing invention that is supposed to save lives but which is used in quite the opposite manner.

The Softest Hammer

BY
CHARLES SHEFFIELD

Fires fascinate me, always have. I had stopped to watch a big one in Silver Spring, and it was ten o'clock before I headed round the Beltway to Dave Bischoff's apartment.

I was very late, but as it turned out I needn't have hurried. Some year we'll have to get organized, but until we do it's either feast or famine. Half the time four or five people bring manuscripts to read, other weeks we have nothing to do but play cards, drink, smoke, and swap the latest facts and rumors from New York.

This was one of the dry weeks. The game of hearts was going so well that I didn't get more than a look and a nod when I came in. I had to wait until the round ended with George Andrews dropping the queen of spades on Rich Brown in the last trick (poetic justice—Rich had given it to him on the pass). Then I put my beer in the icebox, found another chair, and got down to the serious business of dumping on George, who had been doing well all evening and was fifty points in the lead.

"I'm late because I stopped to watch a fire," I explained, while George was shuffling and dealing.

"House?" asked Rich. After a couple of beers he gets terser and terser. I think I can tell how long a meeting has been going just from Rich's words-per-minute statistics.

I shook my head. "Apartment building, over in Silver Spring."

There was silence for a few seconds, while everybody sorted their cards and decided what they would pass, then Jack Locke leaned back against the couch and looked across at me.

"How many floors?" he asked.

He's an odd duck, Jack is. You can

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never tell what he's going to say. Sometimes I blame the Scots accent that makes even normal statements come out sounding strange, but mostly I think it's inside his head.

I thought for a moment.

"About twleve floors, I'd say. The whole building went before I left. The fire trucks were there, but the hoses couldn't pump water in fast enough to stop the spread."

Jack nodded, as though my statement confirmed some point he had been making. "Often the case, that is. D'yer know, half the fires in big buildings stay out of control just because the flow rate isn't big enough through the hoses?"

"So what?" That was George, with a miffed look on his face. He takes his card games seriously, and he had just missed picking up the jack of diamonds. "They couldn't handle hoses bigger than the ones they have now—they'd be too heavy to move around."

Jack nodded and sipped his beer. "Aye, true enough. But d'yer know, a few years back I came this close"—he held up finger and thumb, an inch apart— "to having my hands on something that would have solved that problem. If things had worked out a bit differently, I'd be a multi-millionaire today."

Nobody spoke, but George sniffed, and I don't think it was allergies. About one meeting in four, Jack brings in a story for us to read and criticize. We tear them to pieces. He's one of these people who can tell a story over a beer in the most natural way in the world, but the typewriter does something to him, and his written prose comes out like a bad marriage of Jacqueline Susann and Bertrand Russell. We keep telling him to write out some of the yarns he spins us, and then he gets mad and swears they're all the truth, not stories at all.

George followed up on his sniff. "I presume this was after your experience with the hurricane down in the Caribbean?"

Last time, Jack had told us of a treasure hunt with a British group, looking for sunk galleons on the Spanish Main. George had spotted an inconsistency in the range of Jack's ship, and he had pointed it out with considerable pleasure. Jack pointed out, with just as much pleasure, that he had been quoting tank capacities in *Imperial* gallons, natural for a British ship, and they are twenty percent bigger than U.S. gallons. It made his story possible—just.

"After I got back from Trinidad, that's right," said Jack seriously. "I'd seen enough of the sea after that hurricane: So I took a job as a lab technician in a little town in upper New York State."

George growled, but this time he didn't challenge. We've had some pretty odd jobs between us, and lab technician was one of the more mundane ones. It didn't compare with two years

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with a circus, or eight years in a mental hospital (as a nurse, not a patient). Myself, I've been a builder's laborer, a private tutor, a cook in a holiday camp, and a tour guide for European charter parties. Jack's in his early forties, but he must have had a different job every three months to explain all the places he says he's been and the people he's worked with.

"I wouldn't think you'd get much fire-fighting in upper New York," said Dave from the kitchen. He'd dropped out of the game to make popcorn, and given Melanie his hand to play. "I wouldn't think you'd get much of *anything* up there. I spent a summer up in the Finger Lakes area when I was a kid, and it was the dullest place I've ever been in my whole life."

"But that's because you *were* a kid," said Jack over his shoulder. He turned to the rest of us. "Who was it, Conan Doyle or Chesterton, who said there's more wickedness in the middle of the country than you'll find in the big cities? It didn't take me long to find out that was true. In a couple of weeks, I realized I was seeing the worst eternal triangle I'd ever run across."

He was dealing out cards slowly, not looking up at us. When nobody spoke he knew he had us and went on. "It was an absolutely traditional set-up. Beautiful young wife, stuck away from the city life where she was brought up and looking for something a bit more exciting than she could find in Lundee, New York. And the two men—one of them tall, handsome and impressive; the other short, balding and near-sighted. Funny thing was, it was the handsome one, Vic Lakman, who was married to glamorous Ginny. And it was little Dieter, Dr. Dieter Mahler, who came in to seduce her and break up the happy home.

"After you'd been around him for a few days, you could see how Dieter Mahler could do it. He never thought for a moment that he was undersized and funny-looking. He was cheerful, very bright, and fascinated by women. He just assumed that they would find him as attractive as he found them. They might start out laughing at him, but pretty soon they would begin to accept him at his own evaluation. Surprising, isn't it, how much the view we hold of ourselves conditions the way that others view us?"

"People must think you're wonderful, then," said George sourly. He had just picked up the first trick, and from his comment I thought that it might have the queen of spades in it. I decided to play the hand accordingly. (I was right, but it didn't help me much—I never win at cards.)

Jack ignored George's acid.

"Vic Lakman couldn't blame anybody but himself for Mahler's arrival in Lundee," he went on. "He and Dieter Mahler met at a conference in Atlanta on fire-fighting equipment, and Vic decided that it would be worth a lot to have Mahler come north for the summer. Did I mention to you that

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Vic Lakman's lab was doing research in fire-fighting?"

"I missed it if you did," said Dave. He was back in the game, and the cards were beginning to grease up with the butter from the popcorn. We're a disgusting lot, we go through a deck a week that way. "What were they making, hoses?"

Jack shook his head. "Chemicals. The stuff you put in fire extinguishers. And they were just getting into slippery water."

He paused and looked around the table. "I suppose you all know what slippery water is, don't you?"

There was a long silence, while we all waited for somebody else to be the first to admit ignorance. It rang a faint bell with me, so I took a shot at it.

"Isn't it the same as 'wet' water, water with detergents added to it to make it spread more quickly? I've seen that used at a couple of fires."

"Not quite the same, but you're close." Jack paused and played a card with a look of deep concentration, then laid his hand face-down on the table. "Slippery water has an additive, yer see, same as wet water does, but for a different reason. You use it to increase the amount of water that will pass through a hose. What you do is, you take a polyethylene oxide polymer and add about a pound of it to every four thousand gallons in the water tank. That's not much additive, but it lowers the viscosity and doubles the flow rate through the hose with no increase in head pressure."

Jack's always trotting out strings of facts like that, and we have a devil of a time contradicting him. As it happens, in this case I took the trouble next day to look up what he said in the *Britannica* that Linda bought me for my last Christmas present, and what Jack told us is quite true about slippery water. But I didn't know it at the time, and we all started to look at him and at each other, wondering if this was the point where he was beginning to stray away from the strict and absolute truth.

Jack ignored the looks and took a big handful of popcorn.

"Mahler was an expert on fire fighting chemicals," he said in a corn garbled voice. "Usually he taught a some rinky-dink college down in the South, and an upper New York summer must have been a rare treat fo him. He turned up at the lab one day with his silver cigar case and his paten medicine for the gout, and Vic Lakman settled him into a little beach house by the side of the lake. That part of the state has lakes all over, thousands o them. The Lakmans had a nice bit o beach property, clean and private, and Dr. Mahler liked to have a quiet place to call his own. For what he got up to he needed the privacy."

Jack rubbed his hands on his pant and picked up his cards. "Vic Lakman was a big, handsome man with blon hair and a fair beard. Remember wha George looked like when he grew beard last year?"

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We nodded, and George looked self-conscious.

"Well, that's what Lakman's beard was like. Except that on him it looked good.

"He was a self-made man, somebody who grew up in Long Island City in the Greek or Italian section. I don't think that Lakman was his original name; he started out with something with a bit more of a spaghetti-and-garlic ring to it. But nobody in Lundee was going to suggest that to him. He had a tough reputation, and he'd come up a long way. Somewhere along the road to the top he'd collected Ginny, and he was as proud, doting—and jealous—of her as a man can get. His work habits didn't show it much, because next to Ginny that lab was his pride and joy. He put in twelve-hour days, six days a week, and on Sunday he played golf with the bankers who were financing his expansion plans.

"Ginny was a bird in a gilded cage. It took little Dr. Mahler about two seconds to see that and to make up his mind what he was going to do about it.

"I was there the first time they met, one afternoon when I was cleaning up after a messy lab experiment. Ginny came by to see Vic, and she was wearing a pale pink sundress, off the shoulder. As usual, Vic was off in one of his endless meetings, but I thought that Dieter was going to leap on her at first glance. Within five minutes of the first introduction he had her admitting that she missed access to swimming at the lake, now that he was living in the beach house, and a minute after that he had invited her to come out there, any time she wanted to, for a swim and maybe a drink. She smiled a little—she was about four inches taller than he was—and she thanked him, but she didn't commit herself one way or the other. I thought that was the end of it.

"The following week, Vic sent me out to the beach house one afternoon to drop off some research papers that Mahler had asked for. He did a lot of his work, all the theory part, away from the lab, and only went in there when there were experiments to be done.

"Dieter Mahler was in the outside shower when I got there. Lakman had installed a solar-heated water tank to feed the shower so when somebody came in from the beach—Lakman had imported tons of sand for that—they could take a warm rinse. Most people needed it, too, because that lake water was freezing.

"The big water tank was up on the roof, up where it would catch the most sun, and when I got there I could hear Mahler, singing in a horrible cracked tenor inside the shower stall. And I was very surprised to find Ginny Lakman sunbathing on the beach, lying on a big pink air mattress about seven feet square.

"She was quite a sight. Her little green bikini showed an even, all-over tan, and if she was pale in parts, they must have been awfully private ones. I

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couldn't help goggling. Everything was in the right place, and there was plenty of it. I don't know when I last saw so much smooth, warm flesh. But I think the thing that I noticed most of all was the little heap of cigar ash next to the air mattress.

"I dropped off the papers and left. It wasn't the sort of scene I wanted to tangle with. I'd seen Vic when he was angry, one day when he chewed me out for screwing up a telephone message he was supposed to get and didn't. What would he do if he thought his precious Ginny was playing the two-backed beast with Mahler? I didn't even want to think about it.

"That was all I knew of it for another couple of weeks. At least they kept away from the lab, and I was too busy with the work there to stick my nose in where it wasn't wanted, whatever those two were up to."

Jack paused. We all waited patiently while Dave examined his hand with excruciating care and at last played an apparently random card from it. I always feel that when Dave is stoned, you can tell just what he will be like when he's a hundred years old. He gets slow, tremulous, and not quite all there.

We watched while George dropped the queen of spades on Dave's lead, and Jack nodded knowingly.

"Aye, you can go badly wrong if you don't watch what other people's hands are holding," he said. "That was Dieter Mahler's problem. He had his eye too much on Ginny, and he underestimated the way that Vic could work like a fiend at the lab and still keep his eye on her too. I didn't know it at first, but Dieter had set another lure for Vic Lakman, one that he expected would hold all his attention. The first I heard of it was late one afternoon, when they were sitting talking in the lab.

"'It won't be expensive to make,' Mahler was saying. He was puffing on one of his Pittsburgh stogies, and he had unbent far enough to loosen his tie a little. 'You'll need an initial investment in equipment; then it will get cheap. And it will be a lot better than any of the polymers we use now. Not just twice as good—a *lot* better.'

"Vic Lakman was leaning across the bench towards him. He looked about twice as tall as Mahler, like a Viking god looming over a Nibelung dwarf. 'How good, doctor?' he said. 'You're suggesting that I ought to invest a lot of money in new equipment, but how good will this new stuff be?'

"Dieter Mahler waved his cigar in a circular smoke pattern. 'A hundred times as good as what we have now, at the very least. Probably more like a thousand times better. I assure you, it will revolutionize fire-fighting. Invest in this now, and in five years time we'll be the only people in the business.'

"Lakman pulled a pad of paper over to him and began to scribble numbers. I don't think he saw his wife enter, or the quick look that passed between Ginny and Mahler. Nobody

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took much notice of me—low-priced lab technicians didn't seem to count in business or pleasure.

"'No good,' said Lakman when he finally finished figuring. 'According to this estimate, I'd have to find a hundred and fifty thousand for a working prototype plant. I can't do that without something to show people. Sure you didn't drop a decimal point somewhere?'

"Mahler shrugged. 'What can I say? Error is always possible, and I can't prove I'm right unless we do some kind of small demonstration and make the new polymer? I could do that on a small scale for, oh, say five thousand. That would give us just a couple of pounds of it—but it would be enough to show off what it can do.'

"Lakman crumpled his sheet of calculations up into a ball and looked around the lab—right through me, as I said I didn't count for much. He looked at Mahler again, then from him to Ginny. Finally he nodded. 'All right. I can find five thousand. How soon will you be done if you begin today?'

"'Two weeks,' said Mahler. Then, too cocky, he made what I thought might be a bad mistake. He added. 'I'll make this my top priority,' and he gave Ginny another quick look, one that was a good deal more direct and was probably meant to reassure her that one of his priorities wouldn't go any lower. She didn't blush, but not many women can do that after they reach thirty—even when they have a lot more to blush about.

"Neither Mahler nor Lakman was going to tell me anything, of course, but it was obvious enough for me to piece it together for myself. Mahler had dreamed up some new super-additive, something that would make water *really* slippery. With that super-slippery water, a fire-fighting unit would be able to pump maybe a hundred times as much water through a hose with no extra equipment."

"Now, just a minute, Jack," broke in George. He was looking pleased with himself. Just last week, Jack had told him that a story he had brought to be read was a piece of mindless flatulence. We don't pull punches in the group, but George thought that was going too far, and he had been waiting to get even with Jack since then.

"You're making up this whole thing," he said. "What you just said is a pure physical impossibility. It's absolute nonsense. Water has inertia, like everything else. There's no way you could increase flow without overcoming the inertia, and that would mean completely new equipment to pump the water."

Jack looked at him gravely. "You're quite right, George," he said. "I was overstating. It's not like me to exaggerate, and I'm glad you cut me off when I began to do it. What I meant was, all the work that you'd usually do against *frictional* forces would be avoided when you were pumping

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water through the hose. You would still have to accelerate the water, and if you were sending it up to a high floor, you'd still have to give it enough speed to get it up there. Even so, Mahler's super-slippery water would make a huge difference—most of the problem with the high-velocity hoses comes from fighting the frictional losses—especially when you're using a very long hose.

"Let me go on, and I'll make sure I don't exaggerate anything else. After the meeting with Lakman, Mahler began to come into the lab every day and stay until after midnight. He had a private room in the back, and he locked it when he went in and when he came out. It was easy enough to see how things were going in the experiments from the look on his face when he came out for coffee or to go to the jōhn. Sometimes he'd walk right past me as though I didn't exist, and on other days he'd come out with his cigar lit, and he'd stop and chat and puff away, and swell up with satisfaction like a contented little rooster.

"A couple of times Ginny was at the lab at lunch time, and she and Dieter went off to eat lunch together. They were circumspect enough, but Ginny was looking different these days. It's hard to say how, but she seemed kind of *sleeker* when she was with Mahler, and I almost expected her to rub up against his shoulder and purr.

"I felt sorry for Vic Lakman. He was working harder than ever, juggling his finances to squeeze out cash that he needed for the experiments, and all the time his wife was playing games behind his back. But he must have been a lot more aware of what was going on than I gave him credit for. Late one afternoon, when he was in the back room with Mahler, a fellow in a tweed jacket stopped by with a sealed envelope for him. He wouldn't leave it with me until Lakman called through from inside to tell him that it would be all right.

"Before Lakman came out, Ginny showed up. She was pale, and her hair was a mess—very unusual for her.

"'Mrs. Lakman. Go on in, I'm sure they won't mind.' I said.

"She turned paler than ever. 'No, it's all right,' she said, then she turned and ran out.

"I said that she was pale, but she was nowhere as pale as Vic Lakman when he opened that envelope and read what was inside it. He crumpled the message and thrust it into his pocket as Mahler followed him out of the back room.

"Dieter seemed blind to Lakman's mood. He was bubbling over with excitement and high spirits.

"'Tomorrow I'll be able to show you the whole thing on a larger scale,' he said. 'But I think you'll agree after that demonstration that we are there. How much did I say we had, five hundred and forty grams? I ought to make a note of that.'

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"He pulled out a thin blue notebook, wallet size, opened it and scribbled something in it with an old-fashioned ink fountain pen. Then he turned to Lakman. 'Would you care to have a drink to celebrate?'

"I could hardly stand to look at Lakman's face, but Mahler didn't seem to notice anything. After a few seconds he repeated his question.

"'No,' said Lakman at last. 'I'm not in the mood for that.' And he hurried out without another word, leaving Mahler to puff on his reeking cigar and talk me—without too much trouble—into going over to a bar and having a few bourbons. Most of his mannerisms were European, but his time in the South had taught him a proper respect for good U.S. liquor."

Jack stopped talking and picked up his cards. He frowned at his hand, then looked over to Rich, who was keeping the scores. "How am I doing?"

"You're in last place with eighty-three. Followed by me and Dave with seventy-eight."

"And I'm leading with thirty-eight," said George happily. "No wonder you fall behind, Jack, when you talk so much."

Jack looked at him calmly. "Aye, that's probably true," he said and passed three cards on to Rich.

"But what about Mahler and the Lakmans?" I said. I didn't know about George, but I wanted to hear the rest of it. The others muttered agreement with me.

Jack shrugged. "There's not too much more to tell. I left Mahler and went back to my apartment about nine o'clock. Next morning, Vic Lakman came in to the lab about eight-thirty. He looked terrible, as though he hadn't slept a wink. Usually he was all business, but that morning he just seemed to want to sit around and chat to me. I thought to myself, poor bastard, he can't even think straight with what she's doing to him, and we chatted all morning about everything under the sun. I couldn't get my work done, either, but he was the boss, and if he wanted to pay me to talk to him, that was his option.

"We went and had lunch together, and we were still eating when the police arrived. Dieter Mahler was dead. He had been found by Ginny Lakman about noon, when she went down to the beach house for her morning swim—or whatever it was she got there when Dieter was alive.

"Mahler's head had been bashed in. According to the police surgeon, he had been dead only an hour or so when Ginny found him.

"They ruled her out early. First, she had almost collapsed when she found the body; and, second, the police surgeon did not believe that any woman could have delivered the blow that killed Mahler. He had been hit so hard that his cervical vertebrae had been crushed as his head was driven downwards.

"Vic was ruled out, too, as soon as

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the police found he had been with me for the whole morning. I could swear to that, and anyway to leave the rear part of the lab we would have had to pass through three rooms full of people, plus a receptionist. After half an hour of answering questions about Mahler, and what he knew of his past, Vic was allowed to go home. He went to their house, where Ginny had been taken under sedation. I don't know what they said to each other there."

Jack paused to play a card. He seemed in no hurry to say more. I slapped down a card of the same suit and said, "Come on, that can't be the end of it! What happened next? You said you were almost a millionaire, but all you've told us about is an unsolved murder."

Rich was nodding agreement. "Give," he said—a moderately long speech for him so late in the evening.

Jack shrugged. "Well, that was the end of Mahler's experiments. Lakman never mentioned one word about super-slippery water to anyone else. I would have accepted the police verdict—Mahler's death was the act of some vagrant looking to rob him—if it hadn't been for a couple of odd reports.

"The first was the official description of Mahler's death. It had come while he was actually in the outside shower. They never did find the murder weapon, but the police said they were looking for the traditional 'blunt instrument,' some kind of massive, padded club. The second thing was Mahler's blue notebook. The police had brought it back to the lab for identification. It had been found about thirty-feet from the body, but they didn't seem to attach any significance to that.

"When I realized what must have happened, I went out to the beach house myself and had a good look round there. I found what I expected—but it wasn't evidence that you could ever offer in court."

Now we were all looking at Jack, with our mouths more or less gaping open.

"Come on, then," said George at last. "Don't leave us hanging. What had happened to Mahler?"

Jack played another card casually befoe he answered. "Just what you should have deduced, the way that I deduced it. I told you, Mahler was making super-slippery water—and he had succeeded. He had five hundred and forty grams of the additive, made the day before he was murdered. Enough to treat a couple of thousand gallons of water. It was locked in the lab, and that was off limits—but not to Vic Lakman. He had access to everything. And he'd seen a demonstration the same day as he was given real proof as to what Ginny and Mahler were up to.

"He wasn't a man to stand for that. Where he grew up, adultery was probably considered justifiable homicide. Mahler had to die."

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"But you said Lakman had a perfect alibi," protested Dave. "You gave him one yourself."

"Of course I did." Jack picked up another trick and led a high club. "He *arranged* it so he'd have a perfect alibi. Isn't it obvious what he did? He went to the lab that night, took the sample of super-slippery water additive out of the lab, and went to the beach house. While Mahler was sleeping, he climbed up to the roof of the house and dumped the additive in the water tank, the rain-fed one that supplied the outside shower. The additive made the water flow a hundred times as easily—maybe a thousand times as easily, if Mahler's estimate was correct.

"Next morning, Mahler took his usual swim, then went into the outside shower and turned it on. A couple of hundred gallons of water—well over half a ton—came out of the shower head in a couple of seconds. It smashed Mahler, just as though a sixteen-hundred-pound weight had been dropped down on him from ten feet up. That was the police's 'blunt instrument'—no wonder they never found it."

"But I still don't understand," said Dave. "You said that you found evidence. Why didn't you take it back and show it to the police?"

"I told you, it wasn't the sort of thing they would accept," said Jack gently. "I found what I thought I would find—the faucet of the outside shower still turned on, as it was at the moment when Mahler died. And all around the shower, forty feet in all directions, the marks of a big splash in the sand. A few hundred gallons hitting all at once makes a big spread, much bigger than you'd ever get from the same amount coming down in a slow trickle. I thought that's what I'd see, when I first had the chance for a good look at this. Remember, the police found it thirty feet from the shower."

He pulled a thin blue notebook from his pocket, wallet size, and handed it to me. I opened it and stared at the pages.

"What's it say?" asked George.

I shook my head. "I don't know. It's unreadable, all you can see is a lot of runny blurs. This could say anything at all."

"Aye, true enough," said Jack. He sighed. "That was Mahler's notebook, the one where he kept the details of all his experiments. It was over near the air mattress, where he'd left it when he went in for a swim. When the super-water smashed him, the book got thoroughly soaked by the splash, even though it was thirty feet away. It's a great pity, but, as I told you, Mahler's notes were all kept in ink. It ran so much that I've only been able to make out odd words of it, here and there. But if I ever do decipher it, the whole thing, I'll know Mahler's secret of slippery water, and that will make me rich. I can't see Vic Lakman ever talking about it, or working on it again."

"Hold on," said George suddenly,

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while the rest of us were still staring at the water-run pages of the notebook. "We've not been watching what we were doing here, and Jack has taken all the tricks so far. If we don't watch out he'll take the lot."

"Too late, I'm afraid," said Jack quietly. He laid the rest of his cards, face up, on the table. "I think you'll find these are winning cards for the last three tricks. Let's see, shooting the sun like this takes my score down by fifty-two points, right? I think that puts me nicely in the lead, just ahead of George."

He stood up and picked up the blue notebook, weighing it in his hand and looking at it thoughtfully.

"Aye. Might be a good time for me to call it a day and maybe have one more look at this before I turn in. Drive carefully, all of you, and I'll see you all next week."

He turned back for a second in the doorway. "Aye, and don't any of you take chances when you're in the shower. After all, you never know when some smart man will rediscover Mahler's invention."

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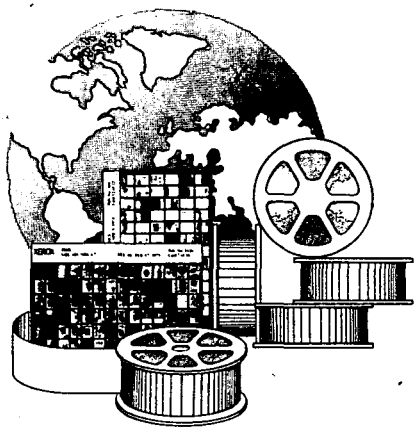

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This is the first of two superior stories we've bought from a most talented new writer who says about herself: "I'm a 26-year-old former New Yorker and New Englander now living happily in Kansas City with my husband Arnie Fenner and a marvelous family of friends. As a result of my displacement, I tend to say things like: 'Y'awl want a cup of cawfee in the Hahvahd Yahd?' I've been a disc jockey for a radio station for blind people, a belly-dance teacher, a graduate student in English. Now I'm a full time sentiment writer for Hallmark Cards."

Second Comings — Reasonable Rates

BY **PAT CADIGAN**

Humphrey hated funerals. Hated them. *Hated* them.

He slipped the bright purple tunic over his head, wound a belt around his waist and yanked it tight. It cut into his skin sharply, but he left it that way. If he was going to do something he didn't like, he might as well be uncomfortable. The intercom in the wall chimed.

"Almost ready, Hum?" asked his brother-in-law's voice.

"Just about. Gotta comb my hair." He could hear his wife speaking indistinctly in the background. "Tell Rita I'll be down directly." He put on his shoes and went into the bathroom.

"Funerals are sick. I hate them," he whispered to his reflection in the full wall mirror as he brushed his shoulder-length black hair into a semblance of order. Stepping back to survey his appearance, he frowned even more sourly. The tie-belt made him look like a sack of something unpleasantly lumpy, and there was a stain on one knee of his white pants. Rita would be too distraught to notice, but his brother-in-law would. He shrugged. Daniel's disapproval was something he could live with. Stabbing the light button off, he went down to the living room.

Rita was holding a handkerchief over her mouth and nose as she rocked gently in the waterchair. Daniel's wife Aleene stood nearby as though she were a servant waiting for instructions, while Daniel himself paced back and forth in front of the door, flipping his credit card nervously. Aleene bent over and touched Rita's shoulder. "Hum's ready, dear. We can go now."

Steeling himself, Humphrey walked over to her and helped her to her feet. She looked up at him, red-eyed,

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tears still rolling down her cheeks.

"Do you want a BeCalm?" he asked lamely.

With a sob, she flung herself into his arms, crying a large wet spot into his shoulder. He held her awkwardly, patting her hair. Aleene watched, shaking her head sadly. Daniel cleared his throat.

"We really should go," he said apologetically. "If we wait any longer, they'll have to hold up the service. Mom will be very upset."

Humphrey nodded, hoping he didn't look as revolted as he felt. His wife's brother didn't look like someone who had just lost his father. Rita, on the other hand, was crying harder than ever, twisting the soft cloth of his tunic in her fists.

"She's getting hysterical. Get her a sedative," he told Aleene.

"But—"

God, how he hated funerals. *Hated* them! "Just get her one or we'll never be able to get her into the car."

"What about afterwards?"

"Bring along a counteractive. A *mild* one. Too much excitement will be bad for her."

Between the two of them, they managed to get the pill down her while Daniel looked on, all but tapping his foot. It was five minutes before the pill took effect, and another five before they could put her in the car.

"Name? asked the car.

"Daniel Greyson," said Daniel, slipping his credit card into the slot on top of the dashboard.

"Scanning," the car said and chimed softly. "Please look into the binocular eyepiece located just in front of you." Daniel leaned forward and did so to let the car check his retina pattern. "Affirmative. Destination, please."

"Allardyce Non-Specific Religious Temple and Crematorium."

The car lifted soundlessly and began circling in preparation for entering the air traffic. Humphrey stared distractedly out the window, fidgeting with a strap of the shoulder harness. Below, rows and rows of houses diminished to the size of dice, freckling a landscape divided regularly by narrow roadways for pedestrians and the few necessary ground vehicles.

He twisted around to look at his wife. She was lying down in the back seat with her head pillowed on Aleene's slender thighs. "Make her sit up and strap in," he said irritably. "That isn't safe."

"She's asleep. Besides, what can it hurt this one time? We're not out joyriding, we're going to a funeral. Anyway, you were the one who made her take the BeCalm. It blanked her right out."

Humphrey suppressed a sigh and looked at his brother-in-law. Daniel was staring straight ahead with his arms folded over his chest. He seemed put-upon.

"How far away is the temple?" he asked.

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Daniel didn't look at him. "About twenty minutes, if we don't hit any heavy traffic. That's why I wanted to get started before this. We could get caught in a holding pattern for I don't know how long. Mom will be down there by herself—" His voice started to shake a little.

"Won't Veronica be there?"

Daniel laughed bitterly. "Oh, undoubtedly. And she'll probably be good and drunk, too. Poor Mom. I don't know why they put up with her all these years, they sacrificed to give her—to keep her—and she'll be making a spectacle of herself—" He took a deep breath. "Bitch. I'd have her barred if I could."

"Daniel!" Aleene was shocked. "Your own sister. I'm just glad Rita isn't awake."

"It's Rita I'm thinking of as well as Mom. How do you think it's going to be for her to see Veronica like that at a time like this? Rita was always Poppa's favorite," he added to Humphrey. "We all knew it, but it didn't matter. He was such a grand old guy. He loved us all—" Daniel fished a handkerchief out of the pouch on his belt and blew his nose. Aleene reached out awkwardly to touch his shoulder, trying not to disturb Rita, who had begun to snore.

"It's okay, Danny boy," she said softly. "It's okay to cry for Poppa. I loved him, too. I know."

Daniel broke down completely. Aleene began sniffing sympathetically. Rita continued to snore. Humphrey rested his head against the door window and closed his eyes. Funerals were horrible. He hated them, hated them, *hated* them.

A policeman strapped to a flying platform was directing air traffic over the temple; otherwise, they might have been caught in a holding pattern indefinitely. Humphrey peered down at the cars stacked triple and quadruple on top of each other. Parking attendants on platforms smaller than the policeman's were guiding the cars coming in, cutting dizzying paths through the air, lighting and taking off like insects.

"God," breathed Humphrey. "How many people are coming to this?"

"It's a big family," Daniel said nasally. He had managed to bring himself under control. In the back seat, Rita was semiconscious and stirring a little, but still prone and spilling tears into Aleene's lap.

"I'm sure a lot of Poppa's friends are here, too," said Aleene. "Poppa has miles of friends."

The car descended, following electronic signals from one of the parking attendants, who guided them to a clear patch of ground marked with a large white X. Daniel rolled down his window. "Do I leave the car here?"

"Yeah. I park it for you. Leave your card in. Mine goes in next to it. It's an authorized temple card." She held it up for Daniel's inspection.

"All right. Give us a minute. We're

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the immediate family, and one of us is sedated."

"Take your time, sir. The service has been delayed because of the large volume of traffic, anyway."

"Poor Mom," Daniel muttered as he got out of the car. Humphrey was already out and trying to pull Rita's limp form from the back seat. Eyes closed, she allowed herself to be pulled forward and then slumped over the folded-down front seat.

"Maybe we should have rented a four-door," said Aleene, her hands fluttering helplessly. Humphrey pinched his wife's cheek several times.

"Come alive, now, honey. We have to get out of the car."

"Where are we?" she sighed wearily.

"We're at the temple. Come on."

"Poppa!" she wailed and slid onto the floor in an untidy heap. Daniel hurried around to help Humphrey extricate her. They got her standing unsteadily between them with her arms around their shoulders and their arms twined about her waist.

"Let's walk her some," said Humphrey. "Fresh air might rouse her a little."

"We're going to look like hell entering with her in this condition," Aleene said primly. She still hadn't forgiven Humphrey for sedating her.

"Would you rather we brought her in screaming like a psycho?" he snapped as he and Daniel struggled to keep the sagging woman upright.

"She can't help it. She's never had anyone die in the family before. She was only a baby when—"

"That's enough," Daniel barked, surprising them all, including himself. "We've got plenty to be concerned about without you two going for each other's throats. He's my father, too, you know."

"I'm sorry, Danny boy. I was just—well, never mind." She glowered briefly at Humphrey before she controlled her expression long enough to give him a cold little apology. Humphrey didn't reply. His wife seemed to be waking up, but reluctantly, fighting it. Maybe the BeCalm had been a mistake, but he wasn't about to admit it to Aleene.

When they reached the front steps of the temple, an usher waiting at the open door rushed down, offering to take Rita. Daniel waved him off. "Aleene, see if you can comb her hair any and wipe off some of that smeared make-up."

Startled, Aleene looked down at herself. "Oh, God, it's all over my pants!" She groaned, but made an attempt to arrange her sister-in-law's mashed and flattened hairdo. "Maybe if I put my scarf over her head—"

"Never mind. Wipe her face and we'll go in."

"Wipe her face with what?"

"With your *scarf*," growled Humphrey, snatching it from around her neck and doing it himself. He gave it back to her ruined with mascara, and

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he could see her toting up the cost of the scarf and the pants. No doubt she'd send him a bill.

"Are we ready now?" asked Daniel impatiently.

"Are we ever." Humphrey avoided looking at Aleene as they half dragged Rita up the steps.

The temple was filled almost to capacity. Under the soft synthesized music, whispers rustled like papers in a wind as they went slowly down the center aisle to the front pew. Rita's mother Adelle stood up when she saw them, relief washing over her face like a storm. She embraced each of them with a fluttery little moan. Over her shoulder, Humphrey saw Veronica Greyson, dressed shockingly in black from head to foot, sprawled lazily in the pew with her ankles crossed on the kneeler.

"Oh, God, Veronica *is* drunk," whispered Aleene to no one. "How *could* she?"

Humphrey was tempted to tell her. He could have used a drink himself, or at least a BeCalm.

There was a shuffle of people, a flurry of whispered directions, and he found himself in the pew behind them, next to a middle-aged couple who introduced themselves as the Swanwicks. Humphrey nodded and told them who he was, feeling mildly annoyed at their approving murmurs. Veronica had moved so that she was directly in front of him, and she was twisted around regarding him through half-closed, bloodshot eyes. Humphrey could see she was drunker than usual. She wore a thick layer of pale make-up that made the rough on her cheeks stand out like clown paint. Her eyes were thickly lined in black and fringed with a veritable forest of false eyelashes.

Hi, she mouthed at him.

Hi, he mouthed back.

She beckoned him with a black-gloved hand; he bent forward obligingly as the Swanwicks bristled.

"I hate these fucking *things,*" she whispered hoarsely, and Humphrey realized the redness in her eyes wasn't totally due to heavy drinking. She had been crying. He patted her arm reassuringly.

"It'll all be over soon."

She swung her head from side to side, her loose brown hair falling in her face. "It's never gonna be over. Never, never, never."

Daniel reached behind Rita and Adelle Greyson and tapped her hand warningly. She jabbed her black middle finger at him but turned around to slouch down in her seat.

Humphrey sat back, pushing his tight belt lower. A small roll of fat hung over it and he folded his arms to hide it. Veronica had really done it this time, he thought grimly. Black at a funeral—she might as well have stood up and shouted her feelings to the entire congregation. Even the Swan-

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wicks, stodgy as they seemed, were bright in greens and yellows.

"Too bad," whispered Mr. Swanwick.

"Isn't it?" Humphrey answered vaguely, unsure of what the man meant. Rita was groping behind her mother for his attention. He gave her his hand automatically, surprised at the vigorous squeeze she gave it.

"Sit with me," she begged.

"Honey, there isn't room for all of us. I'll be right here."

She looked pained, her tongue flicking around her mouth as though she were thirsty. He felt a surge of anger. That damned Aleene must have given her a counter and then a stimulant besides. He'd strangle her with her own scarf.

"Hum, what's wrong? Why are you frowning?"

Not ten minutes before she'd been weeping and wailing, barely able to stand up. He wanted to tear his hair in frustration. "Nothing, Rita. It's all right. They're going to start any moment now. I'm right here if you need me." He knew she wouldn't.

She turned around reluctantly, saying, "Okay. Okay. Okay," as though it were a chant.

Mrs. Swanwick was beaming at him. "How long have you been married?" she asked him sweetly.

"Two years next month."

"Lovely. Just lovely."

He managed a weak grin. He hated, hated, *hated* funerals.

"Too bad," Mr. Swanwick said again.

"Pardon?"

Mr. Swanwick jerked his chin at Veronica. "The things they've put up. Gerald and Adelle. Gerald is my cousin, and I've never understood why he keeps trying with—" he jerked his chin at Veronica's back again. "Totally unnecessary. She—"

The soft organ music became a flourish of trumpets and the entrance of the minister and her two acolytes marked the beginning of the service. Humphrey stood up with everyone else, listening through a hymn he didn't know as the celebrants took their places on the altar steps above the flower-draped coffin. Under the spotlights, their white robes seemed to glow phosphorescently. At the end of the hymn, the minister offered an elaborate blessing, and the spotlights changed to pink. Humphrey restrained himself and didn't groan. He half expected a song-and-dance team to come out next.

The congregation sat down on a cue from the minister he didn't get and he was left momentarily standing alone. Embarrassed, he sat down quickly and stared at his lap, too mortified to listen to the service. It must have been very nice; both the Swanwicks were sniffing, as were most of the people in the temple. It sounded, he thought sourly, like a convention of the last hayfever incurables. Veronica was not sniffing, he noticed. She was

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bent forward with her elbows on her knees, shaking a little. His wife, by contrast, was sitting up stiffly, as though she were having trouble keeping from jumping up. He wondered what Aleene had given her.

The synthesized music, which had died down to an undertone of accompaniment, was beginning to swell in imitation of a gigantic pipe organ, but with trills and embellishments no organ could ever have given it. He looked up at the altar. The minister had acquired a cordless microphone and was winding up for a big finish. The spotlights were writhing through a spectrum of colors. Funerals, he thought sourly.

"The hand of God has touched our Gerald Greyson and called him from our midst," intoned the minister, with feeling. "But the goodness that is the essence of Gerald Greyson—that will always be with us!"

The spotlights went blindingly to white as the casket sank slowly into the floor. As the flowers disappeared, the lights went out and then snapped on again, focused on some curtains to the immediate right of the altar. Humphrey rubbed his forehead tiredly. The organ music was nearly unbearable, the vibrations penetrating bone-deep. In spite of himself, he felt the desired sensation: anticipation.

At the height of the earth-shaking crescendo, a man stepped through the curtains. He was tall, grey-haired, with a trim little mustache and beard, wearing white robes identical to the minister's. He smiled at the congregation and held out his arms.

"Poppa!" screamed Rita. She fought her way out of the pew, ran up to the altar and threw herself into the man's arms. Adelle Greyson and Daniel followed, Aleene trailing them and turning around to look at Humphrey, indicating he should go up, too, He sighed and stood up, touching Veronica's shoulder tactfully. She shrugged away from him.

"That isn't my father," she said huskily. "My father's dead."

He went up to the altar to take his place for the wedding ceremony that would reunite the Greysons, so recently parted by death.

The reception, held next door at a temple annex, was a large, noisy, crowded affair. Adelle and Gerald Greyson sat at the head table with Daniel, Rita, and Aleene in the place of the prodigal Veronica. Humphrey found himself seated at a table with four women and three men he'd never seen before, wondered briefly why he wasn't sitting with the Greysons and decided he was better off. He looked around for Veronica, who would have been conspicuous in her black outfit, but she didn't seem to be there. At the next table, the Swanwicks thought he was looking for them and kept waving to him, calling, "Here we are!" to which he would reply, each time, "There you are!"

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The meal kept him busy. He couldn't count the number of courses served nor could he seem to empty his wineglass. Every other minute, the room toasted the Greysons, who toasted each other and then toasted the room, while waiters (in a departure from the usual servant mechanisms) rushed to fill everyone's glass before the level in each went down below the halfway mark. Eventually he was in worse shape than Veronica had been in, unable to do much more than hunker over his plate and wonder what was on it. Electronic music began to play a medley of the latest holo hits, adding to the pandemonium.

"...look lifelike?" asked the woman next to him, dipping her sleeve in his wine-glass accidentally. He removed it, squeezed the wine out and picked up the glass.

"Pardon?" he asked, having a sip of wine.

"I said, doesn't old Gerry look lifelike?"

Humphrey twisted around to look at him. Old Gerry was on his feet, giving a speech no one could hear but everyone was applauding anyway.

"Yes," someone else answered for him. "It's amazing what they can do, isn't it?"

"I'd swear it was him," said the woman. "Looks like him, sounds like him, acts like him."

"I don't understand how they do it," said another woman, almost with disapproval.

Gerald Greyson was leading his wife out into the middle of the floor as "Anniversary Waltz," for no discernible reason, flowed out of the speakers in the ceiling, liquid with ersatz violins.

"Technology," said the first woman vaguely.

"Well, I know that, but how can they make them so they can eat and drink and—and so on?"

"Haven't you ever seen those antique dolls? My grandmother had one, we found it in the attic, cleaned it up, and you wouldn't believe what we sold it for."

"Probably not."

"Well, those old dolls could drink water, cry real tears, and wet. Of course, that's all they could do. These days—well, look at old Gerry!"

Old Gerry was now dancing with a beaming Rita. Mrs. Greyson was partnered with Daniel. Several other couples were rising to join them.

"You know," the woman went on, "I told my daughter she ought to get something like that instead of having a baby. Less trouble." Everyone laughed.

Humphrey turned around to look at her. She was staring past him, smiling and craning her neck to get a glimpse of Gerald Greyson.

"I heard that Rita, the daughter he's dancing with now, took it so badly they had to dope her up," said the second woman. Or was it a third woman? Humphrey put his elbows on the table

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and propped up his chin in his hands.

"Didn't she *know?* It's been, what, ten years?"

"Closer to fifteen, I think, before they were on the open market. Well, of course, she must have known, but I guess it was still a blow for her. My ex and I used to party-hop with the Greysons, and it was no secret Rita was his favorite. Then, too, she was only a baby when Daniel died."

Humphrey frowned woozily, not sure that he had heard right.

"Oh, come on," said a man. "You aren't saying—"

"That's what I'm saying. Daniel was eight. He hit his head in, of all places, the bathrub and drowned."

"Look, I know they can make them do a lot of things, but they can't make them grow."

"No. The Greysons just traded up for a bigger model every few years."

"That's impossible," Humphrey heard himself saying, as if from very far away. "His wife—"

"His wife is one lucky woman, friend." All the women giggled.

"I'll bet she is," said one of the men.

"Can he cry real tears?" Humphrey asked of no one. "And wet?"

"Who is that?" he heard someone ask.

"I saw him talking to Veronica in church, some friend of hers, I guess."

"No, he came in with Rita and the others."

"He's Rita's husband, nit, don't talk so loud."

"Oh." Everyone shut up.

Humphrey sighed and stood up. "Guess I'm not going to hear anything interesting at this table," he said and walked unsteadily into the crowd of dancers, thinking that he had seen an exit on the other side of the room. Suddenly, he wanted fresh air very much.

Rita seemed to materialize in his arms, laughing and talking excitedly. "Hum! Hum! Here's Poppa! Look! Here's Poppa! It's so wonderful, Hum, he's back, I knew he wasn't dead, I just knew it!"

Humphrey frowned, opened his mouth to correct her, realized it would be bad form with her father's replacement standing right there and shut up again. Gerald Greyson was pumping his hand in a familiar grip, and he saw how Rita would be confused by it. It really did look and feel like her father.

"Good to see you here," Greyson said. "Are you having a good time?"

Humphrey blinked.

"Rita, I think you've been neglecting your husband." He tried to push them together. "Why don't you two—"

"No, thanks, but why don't *you* two keep on dancing? I've just got to have some air. Have to get out. Side. Outside. Stuffy." He fanned himself with one hand and then shouldered his way past them.

"...not electronics, exactly, but biochemicals," someone crooned almost in his ear. "And electricity. Or something like that."

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"And it works?"

Humphrey turned around and found a couple deep in conversation as they danced, nearly rubbing up against him without noticing him.

"Marvelously. You know Ted and George Simons? Can you guess which one of them is—"

Humphrey fled, looking over people's heads for any sign of a door leading out. People bumped into him, stepped on his feet, elbowed his ribs. He might have been invisible.

"When you die, Ed, I think I'll just have you stuffed."

"You're awful."

"No, you're awful."

"You're all awful," muttered Humphrey, and spotted a door marked PATIO. He struggled against the current of dancers, trying to make his way toward it.

"...Jody died, I just let them take over. We had advance arrangements. They're so reasonable, too, I was surprised."

"...hated to break up a good foursome, so they used their own money and replaced *her*, too, and they weren't even related. Now the four of them..."

"...came home from school and asked me was the President dead. What could I say? I didn't know, I told him to ask..."

"...last year. You didn't know? Good Lord, I was fifty-four. A heart attack. Terrible shame if I do say so myself..."

He reached the door and fell through it, gasping with relief. It swung to behind him, cutting off the music and voices. Grimacing, he undid the knot of his belt and let it fall. He rubbed his sagging stomach and immediately felt better. The air was surprisingly cool for a late afternoon in midsummer, and he took great, deep breaths of it as though he had just emerged from underwater.

"Care to join me?"

He looked around. Veronica was reclining on a chaise lounge with a bottle of vodka. He shuffled over and sat down by her feet. "Wondered where you were."

"Been in this bottle." She held it up; it was three-quarters empty. "Want a hit?"

He shook his head. She shrugged, tilted it up and drank deeply.

"Uh-huh." She smacked her lips. "Enjoy the funeral?"

"I hate funerals."

"Yeah? How many you been to?"

"Three, four. Friends of our family. Both my parents are still alive." He shuddered. "I suppose some day—"

"Do you know," asked Veronica, "Daniel is dead?"

"I didn't, until a few minutes ago."

"Had to grow up with that *thing* in the house. Now Mom has another *thing*. They said treat it like your brother. Be goddamned if *I* would. Rita was only two. She didn't care."

"Aleene married it. Him." He still couldn't believe it.

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"That's a ballbuster, ain't it? Plenty of live men, she marries a *thing*."

"Is it legal?"

"Mom just married a *thing*."

"Yes, but she was already married to him. Sort of."

"Well, it isn't *il*legal. A lot of people prefer *things* to other people."

"Less trouble," Humphrey said, echoing the woman at the table.

"Damn right on. They eat, sleep, make love—I'd sooner do it with a 'lectric cord. A live 'lectric cord. Anything. But it screws on command. You don't bother it, it won't bother you. That's what I call perfection. Build a better screwing machine, and the world will beat a path to your door." She tilted the bottle up again. "When Mom goes, that's the end. I'm through with all of them. There'll be two *things* living in a house together. For Rita's benefit. Daniel, as you know, has already attained *thing*ship. Three *things*, one live idiot woman, scuse me, she's my sister and I know what she is, and one disgusting drunk, and that's what *I* am." She leered at him suddenly. "Hey, baby, whaddaya say we run off together?"

Humphrey's mouth dropped open. "Ah...why?" he laughed nervously.

"We may be the only two live people left around here in the not-too-distant future. Hell, we may be the only two live people now. Rita doesn't count."

He was aware of feeling like he should say something in Rita's defense, but his mind was still foggy, and there was something else he was curious about. "I don't understand why they never told me about Daniel."

"Why should they? If you're happy with a syntho-heart, or a glass eye, or a dildo, why mention it?" Veronica looked troubled. "I'm not drunk enough. Why aren't I drunk enough?"

Humphrey thought of asking her why she didn't tell him and changed his mind. It didn't matter. He stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Back inside. I ought to check on Rita. Aleene gave her a stimulant and it's made her awfully hyper."

"That means you're not running off with me, I take it?"

He laughed again, weakly.

"Same to you, buddy." She toasted him with the bottle before killing it and flinging it away. It landed with a nerve-jangling crash. "Olé!"

Humphrey turned away from her and walked back to the door to the reception hall. Just as he put his hand on the knob, Rita and her father spilled through it and took hold of his arms.

"Darling, are you all right?" Rita ran her hand through his hair and felt his face concernedly.

"Fine. Just needed some air." He tried to pull away.

"You looked pretty woozy," said Greyson.

"Too much to drink."

"Ah. Rita, see about getting this fine husband of yours a glass of water."

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She nodded and hurried away, leaving them alone together. Humphrey suddenly felt very awkward, unsure of what to do or say. What could he say to this *thing*—father-in-law, he corrected himself. Father-in-law, in spirit. Sort of.

"I've been talking to Veronica," he said, glancing back to the chaise lounge. It was empty, Veronica nowhere in sight.

"Poor dear. Someday, we'll get through to her," Greyson said serenely. "Then we can put her troubled soul to rest."

Humphrey frowned in puzzlement. "Put her troubled soul to rest?" It didn't make any sense at first. And then, it did, horribly.

"She killed herself when she was twenty-one, already a hopeless alcoholic. That was ten years ago. My wife felt such profound failure as a mother that we chose to have her reproduced and replaced as she was, without the knowledge that she'd died, of course. Adelle refuses to give it up. It *has* gotten expensive—every so often, somebody slips up and she finds out she's dead. Then she shuts herself off, and we have to replace her again. But no parent wants to be left feeling that a child has been let down. So we endure the scenes, the embarrassments, the occasional disgrace or scandal. Just so we can keep trying to help her. I remember the beautiful child that she was, and I think, someday—well." He smiled at Humphrey, who began to feel dizzy.

"Don't you ever get the feeling that it's, ah, hopeless?" he asked after several moments had passed.

"Where there's life, there's hope, eh, Hum?" Greyson clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go see what's become of your ice water. That Rita."

Humphrey allowed himself to be pulled back into the reception, back into the place where he could not tell the live people from the replacements, where there would be no need for him to grow or change or do anything, really at all. After a little more wine, it didn't make any difference anyway.

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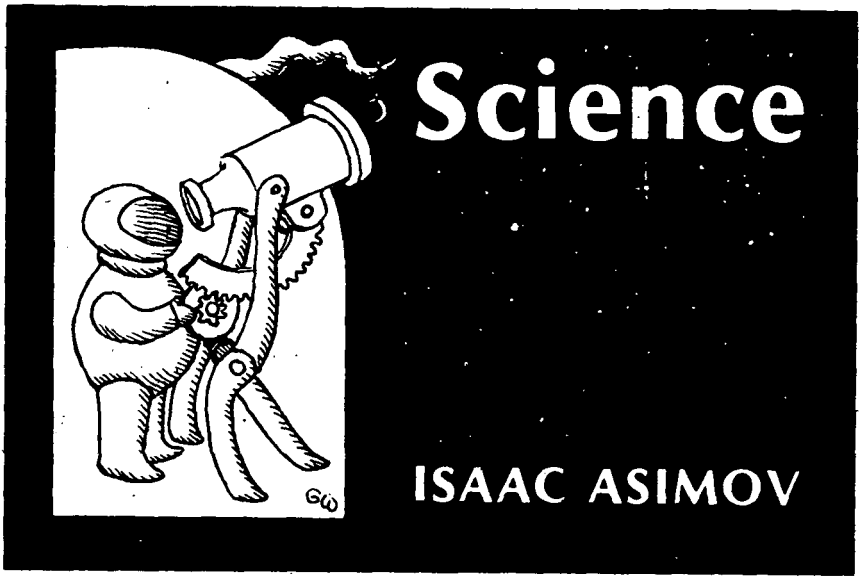

NOTHING AND ALL

Back in 1955, when I was a full-time and active member of the faculty at the medical school, I was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor Biochemistry, something which swelled my bosom with pride, you may be sure.

Over the course of the next three years, however, I was engaged in a Homeric struggle with the Director of the institution* and, as of June 30, 1958, I was no longer a full-time, active member of the department. I did manage to retain the title, just the same, and I made it perfectly clear to everyone that I didn't intend *ever* to give it up.

So there I was, without duties and without salary, but still Associate Professor of Biochemistry.

The years passed, the decades passed, and my title remained— unchanged. And I grew sad for I was becoming a little too late in my youth for that qualifying adjective, and I knew there was no way of getting promoted as long as I wasn't really teaching.

But things were changing at the University, too, and the attitude

**The details are in IN JOY STILL FELT (Doubleday 1980), the second volume of my autobiography.*

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toward me altered continually for the better. Last year I was told they were going to promote me.

I said cautiously, "But I'm not doing any teaching, and I am no longer in a position to do more than give an occasional lecture."

They explained the situation to me in words of one syllable. "Who cares?" they said.

And as of October, 1979, after 24 years, I become (finally) a Professor of Biochemistry. No adjective.

By a peculiar coincidence, the same thing happened to the neutrino. Discovered just after I became Associate Professor, it, too, had to wait 24 years before being promoted to a new level of importance.

The difference is that my promotion is definite, while that of the neutrino is still very tentative. On the other hand, if the neutrino's promotion holds, the results are of truly cosmic importance, whereas my own promotion is perhaps a hair's-breadth short of cosmic.

But let's get to the details.

The existence of the neutrino was first predicted on theoretical grounds, in 1931, by the Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli. Its properties, if it were to meet the theory, made it elusive. It had no electric charge, little or no mass, and did not interact with matter. Under those circumstances, it was a "nothing-particle" and the chances of detecting it were almost nil.

It was not until 1956 that two American physicists, Frederick Reines and Clyde L. Cowan, set up an experimental procedure that definitely detected the neutrino and demonstrated its existence. (Actually, there is both a neutrino and an anti-neutrino, the two being equal and opposite in certain properties, and it was the anti-neutrino that Reines and Cowan detected. For purposes of this essay, however, we'll let "neutrino" stand for both.)

Although neutrinos slip through matter without any trouble, so that many trillions pass through the Earth from from end to end for every one that is stopped on the way, they are not to be ignored, if only because they exist in such quantity. The Sun produces them copiously, for instance. The Sun owes its existence as a light-radiating body to the energy derived from the conversion of hydrogen atoms to helium atoms. Four hydrogen atoms are converted to one helium atom, and for every helium atom produced, two neutrinos are also produced. Since hundreds of millions of tons of hydrogen are converted to helium every second in the Sun, you can well see that enormous quantities of neutrinos are boiling out of it constantly.

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In fact, 1.75×10^{38} neutrinos emerge from the Sun every second. That's 175,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 175 trillion trillion trillion neutrinos. Since only a negligible number of neutrinos interact with other subatomic particles and in this way lose their identity, we are not too far off if we say that all the neutrinos produced by the Sun are permanent residents of the Universe.

The Sun has existed for something like 1.5×10^{17} seconds, and if it has been producing neutrinos at its present rate for almost all that time, the Universe contains 2.6×10^{55} neutrinos that are Sun-born.

Then, too, there are several hundred billion stars in our Galaxy and perhaps a hundred billion galaxies altogether, and the Universe as a whole may be three times as old as the Sun, so that altogether the number of neutrinos is far more enormous still.

If all the stars in all the galaxies had been producing neutrinos at the same rate as our Sun does (on the average) throughout the lifetime of the Universe, the total number of neutrinos would be something like 10^{78}. This, however, would be an underestimate, for it is quite likely that the major neutrino producers are the relatively few stars of great mass, the supernova explosions and other violent events, and perhaps even the big bang itself.

At any rate, astronomers estimate that if all the neutrinos now existing in the Universe were to be spread out evenly, there would be 100 in every cubic centimeter. (Of course, they would only be passing through, for neutrinos, which are thought to be massless, would be travelling at the speed of light.)

Since more neutrinos are constantly being formed and virtually none are destroyed, the number per cubic centimeter is constantly increasing, but slowly. If that number is now exactly 100, and if the Universe is 15,000,000,000 years old and has been producing neutrinos at the same rate all that time, then it will not be for another 150,000,000 years that the density will rise to 101 neutrinos per cubic centimeter.

The Universe, assuming a radius of about 12,500,000,000 light-years, has a volume of roughly 10^{85} cubic centimeters, which means it contains about 10^{87} neutrinos. For every neutrino in the Universe that has been manufactured by our Sun, there are a hundred million trillion neutrinos manufactured by other bodies.

In last month's essay, I said that the total number of nucleons (protons or neutrons) in the Universe is 3×10^{77} and that these were thought to account for some 99.9 percent of the mass of the Universe. It follows that there are roughly 3,000,000,000 neutrinos in the Universe for every

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nucleon, but if neutrinos are massless they do not, naturally, contribute to the total mass of the Universe.

There is another class of common massless particle: the photon. This is the constituent particle of electromagnetic radiation (of which visible light is the best-known example). Like the neutrinos, photons are massless and chargeless, but unlike the neutrinos they interact readily with matter so that they are forever being absorbed and re-radiated. It is estimated that the Universe contains a billion times as many photons as it does nucleons.

Well, then, if all the matter in the Universe were smeared out perfectly evenly and if we took a snapshot of the resulting mess in a zero-time instant, it would turn out that in every volume of 30 cubic meters, there would be 3,000,000,000 neutrinos, 1,000,000,000 photons and one (mark you, *one)* nucleon.

And yet since it is only that one nucleon that is thought to have mass, it is only that one nucleon that plays a role in deciding whether the Universe is open or closed, whether it will expand forever, or whether it will someday bring its expansion to an ever-slowing halt and begin to contract again. Most astronomers feel that the one nucleon is not enough to close the Universe and to make it contract someday. There should be more like 100.

The most common method of neutrino production is that of the conversion of a proton to a neutron. This takes place by the decillions of decillions per second the Universe over, in the course of fusing hydrogen into helium in the various stars. As a proton changes to a neutron, a positron (which is an "anti-electron") and a neutrino are formed.

In the much less frequent, but equally possible, change of a neutron to a proton, an electron and an anti-neutrino are formed. We have agreed, for convenience's sake, to let the term "neutrino" include both itself and its anti-particle. Let us do the same for "electron" which will include both itself and its anti-particle, the positron.

If we do this, we can say that neutrino formation and electron formation usually go together. In a way, this is fitting because both electrons and neutrinos belong to a class of particles called "leptons," and the formation of both types of leptons according to particular rules makes it possible to have a "conservation of lepton number" to say nothing of preserving several other conservation laws. (It was in order to preserve these laws that Pauli suggested the existence of the neutrino in the first place.)

But then, other leptons were discovered. In 1935, nearly forty years after the discovery of the electron, the American physicist Carl D. Ander-

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son discovered the "muon," (see THE LAND OF MU, F&SF, October 1965). The muon is 207 times as massive as the electron, but in all other properties it is identical with the electron. Nowadays, we speak of the muon as another "flavor" of the electron.

We might picture the situation thus: An electron is in an energy-valley. If energy is pumped into it, it is driven up a mountain-slope until it finds a ledge in which it can rest momentarily. It is then a muon. However, the rest is only momentary. The muon is unstable and in a millionth of a second or so breaks down to an electron again, giving off energy in the form of neutrinos.

There is, of course, a muon and an anti-muon—analogous to the case of the electron. The formation or decay of a muon involves the production of an anti-neutrino, and the formation or decay of an anti-muon involves the production of a neutrino—again analogous to the case of the electron (except that the electron is stable and doesn't decay).

The neutrinos associated with muons seem to be identical in all properties with those associated with electrons, and yet it seems they do not substitute for each other. If we speak of electron-neutrinos and muon-neutrinos, one can participate in certain specific subatomic particle-interactions that the other cannot.

In fact, physicists speak of "conservation of electron-number" and "conservation of muon-number" as two separate laws, and if both are to exist, the electron-neutrino and muon-neutrino must be distinct and must exist as separate flavors.

Recently, a third flavor of the electron was detected, a still higher and more energetic ledge on the mountainside. This is the "tau-electron" (which should be called the "tauon" to my way of thinking). It has associated with it a "tau-neutrino," which is, again, indistinguishable from the electron-neutrino and the muon-neutrino, but is somehow a separate particle. (There may be an infinite number of ledges, higher and higher up the mountainside, requiring greater and greater energies to form. Presumably each progressively higher ledge is less likely to be occupied and plays a less important role in the Universe. In any case, we are dealing with only three flavors of the electron so far, and three flavors of the neutrino.)

The existence of three different flavors of neutrinos, indistinguishable but distinct, is troublesome. If they are distinct, they must differ in some property we have not yet learned to measure or, even perhaps to recognize. And perhaps the difference is so subtle that it is not a true difference.

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For instance— All particles have properties that can be associated with wave-forms (just as all waves have properties that can be associated with particle-forms). Therefore we can suppose that neutrinos travel through the Universe in the form of tiny waves. What if there are three kinds of waves, one for the electron-neutrino, one for the muon-neutrino, and one for the tau-neutrino—an e-wave, an m-wave, and a t-wave.

Suppose, further, that each neutrino is made up of all three types of waves, with one of them dominant. The electron-neutrino, for instance, has the e-wave dominant, with the m-wave and the t-wave supplying minor modifications. The wave-summation is a slightly altered e-wave, but one that, despite the alteration, is still recognizably an e-wave. We would then have an electron-neutrino.

The same argument, suitably modified, can be used to define a muon-neutrino and a tau-neutrino.

If all three waves travelled at the same speed, the wave-summation would always be the same, and a particular flavor of neutrino would remain that flavor forever.

But what if the three waves travelled each at a different speed?

In that case, the relation of each wave to the others would constantly change, as one wave constantly moved ahead of the second, and as the third constantly fell behind the second. The summation-wave would change in some regular fashion, with first one variety of wave and then another dominating. In that case, a neutrino would be sometimes an electron-neutrino, sometimes a muon-neutrino, sometimes a tau-neutrino. This situation is referred to as "neutrino oscillations."

This was first suggested as a possibility in 1963 by a group of Japanese physicists.

In the late 1970's, Frederick Reines, one of the original detectors of the neutrino, along with Henry W. Sobel and Elaine Pasierb of the University of California set up an experiment designed to see if such oscillations took place. For the purpose, they used 268 kilograms of very pure heavy water, containing hydrogen nuclei made up of a proton and a neutron in close association. They shielded the heavy water so that no particles could get in but neutrinos and used a uranium-fission reactor as a neutrino source. The reactor produced *only* electron-neutrinos.

A few of the neutrinos, of the many trillions formed, strike the heavy hydrogen nuclei and two interactions are possible. First, the neutrino, on striking the proton-neutron combination, will simply split them apart and will then keep on going itself. This is a "neutral-current" reaction, and *any*

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of the neutrino-flavors can bring this about. Second, the neutrino, on striking the proton-neutron combination, can induce a change of the proton into a neutron, producing an electron, and in this case the neutrino ceases to exist. This is a "charged-current reaction," and *only* an electron-neutrino can do this.

If electron-neutrinos remain electron-neutrinos at all times, physicists can calculate exactly how much of each reaction ought to take place in a given time. If there is oscillation, so that the electron-neutrino is sometimes a neutrino of other flavors, then the neutral-current reaction isn't affected, but the charged-current reaction should take place considerably less often than is to be expected, since when the electron-neutrino was in other flavors it could not produce a charged-current reaction.

Reines found the neutral-current reaction was quite up to the proper level, but that the charged-current reaction took place with somewhat less than half the calculated frequency. He therefore announced, in 1980, that his experiment seemed to demonstrate the existence of neutrino-oscillation.

I say "seemed" because the experiment was carried out at the limit of the detectable. Only about 80 neutrino events per day were detected that belonged to the experiment, among 400 neutrino events that seemed to be the result of neutrino bombardment from sources other than the fision reactor.

Besides, other experiments, conducted in Geneva, Switzerland, did not seem to show neutrino oscillation. What will be needed, therefore, will be more and better experiments, and I have no doubt they will be forthcoming. There is even a chance that events will outdate this essay before it sees print.

What makes the possibility of oscillation persuasive to me, despite the tenuousness of the evidence, is that it explains several different, apparently unrelated, puzzles in astronomy.

First, there is the matter of the solar neutrinos. For years now, astronomers have been puzzled over the fact that careful attempts at detection have not uncovered as many neutrinos issuing from the Sun as theory would lead them to expect (see THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT, F&SF, November 1979). In fact, the highest figure obtained is about a third the theoretical.

The neutrino-detecting devices, however, are designed to detect *only* electron-neutrinos, and the supposition was that the Sun emitted only electron-neutrinos and that these remained electron-neutrinos all the way to the Earth.

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If, however, there are oscillations, what reaches us could be an equal mixture of the three flavors, and then we would detect only one-third the electron-neutrinos we would expect to detect.

Here's another point. If all three flavors of neutrinos were massless (as the assumption has been for decades), then all three must travel through the vacuum of space at the speed of light. Travelling at equal speeds, the neutrinos could not oscillate, for that depends on the three waves travelling at different speeds. If, however, the neutrinos had a very tiny mass, they would travel at a trifle less than the speed of light, and if each flavor had a slightly different tiny mass (that representing the hitherto unrecognized distinction among them) they would each travel at a slightly different speed just short of that of light.

In other words, neutrino-oscillation implies that at least one, and perhaps all three, of the neutrino-flavors have mass. There is, in fact, a report of experiments by physicists in Moscow that involves a point that has nothing to do with oscillations and that seems to show the electron-neutrino to have a mass of possibly as much as 40 electron-volts. This would give it a mass 1/13,000 that of an electron or about 1/23,000,000 that of either a proton or a neutron.

That's not much of a mass, but then there are a heck of a lot of neutrinos.

For instance, I said there were 100 neutrinos per cubic centimeter if all the neutrinos were spread out evenly over the Universe. However, they are *not* spread out evenly.

It is in the core of the stars that the vast majority of neutrinos are formed, and even though neutrinos move at very nearly the speed of light, it would take considerable time for them to get really far away from the stars in which they were formed. It would take even more time for them to get really far away from the galaxy in which they were formed, and even more time to get away from the galactic cluster in which they were formed.

In other words, one would expect a cloud of neutrinos to exist in the neighborhood of a galaxy and, even more so, in the neighborhood of a cluster of galaxies. The cloud would be a permanent one, for even as the neutrinos disperse in all directions at nearly the speed of light, so that the cloud forever thins out at its edges, new swarms of neutrinos are constantly being formed as replacements by all the stars of the galaxies.

Now, then, astronomers associate the mass of stars with their luminosities in a fairly straightforward manner. If the mass of an entire galaxy is considered, however, the overall luminosity of the galaxy is less

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than might be expected from the relationship of mass and luminosity existing among individual stars. Clusters of galaxies fall short in luminosity to an even greater extent.

It is almost as though a substantial fraction of the mass of a galaxy is deficient in luminosity, or is perhaps entirely dark, and that this is even more extreme in clusters of galaxies. The existence of such "dark mass" is also indicated by the fact that clusters of galaxies, where the dark mass is greatest, do not seem to have the required intensity of gravitational attraction judging by its stars alone, to hold the individual galaxies of the cluster in place. The dark mass is necessary, then, for the very existence of the clusters, as clusters.

One possibility is that the dark mass consists of black holes (see FINAL COLLAPSE, F&SF, June 1977), but there is no good evidence for the existence of enough black holes to account for it. This is especially so since black holes in the quantity required ought to give themselves away by the effects of their gravitational fields, which are enormously intense in their near vicinity.

But now a second possibility arises. What about the neutrino cloud that hovers about galaxies and clusters of galaxies. Even if each neutrino has an almost negligible mass, the total would be enough to account for the fall-short in luminosity and for the manner in which clusters of galaxies remain together.

And that brings up a third problem, and the most cosmic of all: the question as to whether the Universe is open or closed.

I have already said that for every nucleon in the Universe there seems to be about 1,000,000,000 photons and 3,000,000,000 neutrinos.

There seems to be no question (at least so far) that photons are truly massless. Therefore the mass of the photons, however many, is zero, and they do not contribute to the possible closing of the Universe.

On the other hand, suppose that neutrinos do oscillate and that they therefore have mass, and suppose that the Soviet estimate of the mass of the neutrino as equal to 40 electron-volts is correct. In that case, the 3,000,000,000 neutrinos that exist for every nucleon have a total mass equal to 125 nucleons.

The startling conclusion is that the mass of the Universe is not primarily that of the nucleons at all, as has been supposed. If neutrinos do, in fact, oscillate, then 125/126 of 99.2 percent of the mass of the Universe is due to its neutrino content, and it is these "nothing-particles" that are essentially the Universe. Everything else—all the matter that makes up the black

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holes, quasars, pulsars, stars, planets, cosmic dust, and us—is just an inconsiderable impurity.

What's more, astronomers have said that in order for the Universe to be closed, there would have to be about 100 times as much mass as careful observations seemed to indicate it has. That careful observation, however, has been devoted entirely to determining, in effect, the quantity of nucleons in the Universe.

But, if the neutrinos oscillate, then it is quite likely that the total mass of the Universe is more than 100 times the mass of its nucleons and by a comfortable margin, too. That means the Universe is closed, that its expansion will someday stop and that it will then begin to contract, that there will eventually be a new cosmic egg and a new big bang, and so on, over and over, world without end.

And I must admit that, emotionally, that's what I want. I think a closed Universe is elegant and beautiful when compared with a one-shot open Universe that expands without end and dies without progeny. I earnestly hope, therefore, that Reine's results prove to be correct, and while if they do not, I will have to accept that, I will do so without joy.

I would like to point out, too, that if neutrinos close the Universe, then we have a replay on an infinitely more cosmic scale of the drama of "The Lord of the Rings" (to which I referred at the beginning of last month's essay).

The cosmic fate of the all (the Universe) is decided at last by the tiny mass of the nothing (the neutrino), just as the world-wide struggle against the evil of Sauron was decided at last by the painful delivery of the Ring to the Mountain of Doom by little Frodo.

Nature imitates art.

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Some years ago, Keith Roberts wrote several stories about a thoroughly modern and delightful witch named Anita (two were published in F&SF: "The Mayday," November 1970 and "Junior Partner," December 1970). Here is a brand new Anita story, and we're pleased to report that she's in fine and meddlesome form.

The Checkout

BY

KEITH ROBERTS

The old lady stood beligerently, glowering round her at the well-stocked shelves of the supermarket. She wore a black and shapeless coat, from beneath the hem of which coyly protruded an inch or two of bright floral apron. An equally shapeless hat of faintly mildewed felt completed her *ensemble*. Her feet, in their black, insecty shoes, were planted a trifle apart; and in one brown, gnarled fist she gripped a heavy stick, which she twitched from time to time with an air of vague menace. "'Arf 'our om bin stood 'ere," she announced to the air around her, "and nobody en't bin *neer*. Call this *service?*"

"Oh, Gran," said Anita, appearing from behind one of the tempting arrays with a well-filled cart, "don't be so silly. It's a supermarket, you know that very well. You have to serve yourself."

The elder Thompson emitted one of her inimitable whoops. Several shoppers faltered and stared round in alarm. "Serve *yerself?*" she said incredulously. "Serve *yerself?* Wot's the world comin' to, I'd like ter know. Very idea, servin' *yerself*. In *my* young days—"

"Well, it was you who wanted to come in," said Anita, reaching past. Another jar joined the heap in the cart. Shopping in the biggest supermarket in Kettering had been a mistake in more ways than one; she always had been a sucker for strawberry conserve. "I told you we'd do better in the village."

"Well, om a-gettin' *out*," pronounced the old lady. 'Orl them things there blarin' an' 'ollerin', meks yer *'ead* goo funny." She glared at the nearest of the wall loudspeakers, from which, interspersed with Muzak, poured cheerful spiels about the Latest Reduced Lines. "Ayya got orl them bits?"

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Anita pushed her hair back. The day was warm and sticky; and, as ever in a town, she was feeling niggly and fretful. Her granny's current mood, culminating in her noisy insistence on finishing the shopping in "one o' them noo-fangled places," had hardly helped matters. "I couldn't get any frogs legs," she said. "They just don't stock them. Would *escargots* do instead?"

"An' *wot*," said Granny Thompson fiercely, "might they be, when they're at 'um?"

"I don't know quite. Snail, I think."

"Then why dun't they *say* so?" muttered the old lady belligerently. She fumbled in various pockets, failed to locate her glasses and produced instead a much-creased scrap of paper, which she held about a half inch from the end of her nose. "I esspect we shall atter mek do," she said. "No, we ken't. *Noot's* eyes, we ken't do without them..." She peered round as if expecting the absent commodity to materialize before her. "Dun't tell me they en' got none o' them neither..."

"Try the delicatessen counter," said Anita nastily. Then she gasped. The old lady had set off at remarkable speed for the rear of the premises, where patés and gooey cheeses, rollmops and hams and smoked-salmon slices displayed themselves in cabinets lit by coldly glowing fluorescent tubes. Anita pattered after her. 'No, Gran, please! They won't *understand!* It was a *joke...!*"

Her granny waved the list, dancing by this time with temper. "No *noot's* eyes?" she bellowed. "No *noot's* eyes? Them there tiger bits I din' 'ardly esspect, not these days. An' snake fillets is 'ard, I know, on account o' the winter we 'ad. But call yerselves a *shop?* Everythink, yore supposed t'ev. But you en't wuth comin' to..."

"Get the manager," said a stout, anxious lady in a bright-checked apron. Anita grabbed her granny's arm and began to haul her away by main force.

"Dun't you bother," spluttered Granny Thompson to the small, interested crowd that had begun to gather. "'Cos *I* dun't want ter see 'im. I en't comin', 'ere ner more; an' yer kin tell 'im that from me..."

The rest was really all Anita's fault. As a thoroughly modern witch, she always had believed in labor-saving devices. A low-level spell, laid almost one-handed, had rendered the shopping cart much more manageable. The thing had in fact been driving itself, with only the lightest of touches to steer it round the corners. In her anxiety to reach the checkouts, she clean forgot to degauss the charm; and the cart, as if scenting victims, accelerated toward an immense, red-faced person in a tent-like floral dress. Anita clapped a hand over her eyes. "Do like forces *attract*," she moaned, leafing mentally through her physics, "or do they *repel*..." The matter was rapidly resolved. The clash of metal was followed by a flash of bright blue light;

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the second cart shot off in a parabolic fashion, shedding its topload of vegetables as it went. A small man reeled backwards, felled, it seemed, by a cabbage; eggs by the dozen met sticky collective dooms; the immense lady, arms whirling, sat down decisively in the narrow bit by the first of the checkouts, where she instantly became irretrievably wedged. At which point the manager appeared. Anita had never really believed the thing about banana skins; as it turned out though, it was exactly true. He shot past much in the fashion of a water skier, emitting a thin, high wail of despair; and a large stand of Cut Price Lines disintegrated, like metallic hail.

"Oven stuff," yelled Granny Thompson, struck by a sudden thought. "That there oven stuff, gel. We need it fer the *catalyst*..." She darted aside, then paused, glaring up at the nearest of the offending loudspeakers. Anita whipped her spell-arm down, but for once she was a fraction too late. The assaulted machine whooped to itself, emitted a loud crack and a cone of bright yellow smoke. The effect sped on round the walls of the great shop, unnoticed in the still-growing din, till a stray charge bridged a gap and the burglar alarms set up a merry and gigantic clamor. Instantly, and with appalling speed, the chain reaction spread outside. It had all proved too much for the posse of discouraged dogs who usually sat tied to the rail by the door. Boxers and Alsatians put their heads back and howled, and a basset hound broke his lead and bolted. A small car screeched to a halt; behind it, a large green United counties omnibus did not. The world became a place of crunching metal and rolling, jangling hubcaps, and Anita leaned against the wall and covered her eyes once more. Far off, her keen ears had detected a distant *bee-bah, bee-bah* sound. Perhaps it was the police. Or the fire brigade. Or both.

Granny Thompson had finally, after much fruitless fumbling, located her glasses. She perched them askew on the end of her nose and peered at the scene of carnage with every appearance of bewilderment. "Lor-a-daisy," she said at length. "They must 'ave orl gorn orf their 'eads..."

"Well," said Granny Thompson complacently, "I still dun't see wot it was orl *about*. Allus did think that Ket'rin' lot was a bit funny. Now I *knows* it..."

Anita brushed at her skirt and snorted. "Well, I think we were lucky not to get arrested."

"Arrestid?" said the old lady in great surprise. "Wot *for? We* 'adn't done nothink. It were that there manager bloke wot started it, knockin' orl that stuff down uvver. It en't safe I dun't reckon, none on it. *Supermarkits*..." She snorted. "Then that there gel a-sniftin'. Wadn't no call fer that..."

"It wasn't us, Gran," said Anita. "I've never *seen* anybody so unhappy,

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her vibes were *awful*. There's something terribly wrong, I'm sure of it..."

"Yer kin say that agin," said the old lady grimly. "An' I knows wot *with*..."

The bus ground to a halt, and Anita maneuvered the large shopping bag from under the stairs and jumped down gratefully. She set off down the rutted track that led to Foxhanger Copse, towing it behind her. Out of sight of the main road she stopped and took a breath. A quick pass, and the air around the basket became full of little twinkling lights. The thing rose to shoulder height, uncertainly at first, then oriented itself and zoomed off through the trees like a small, somewhat oddly shaped helicopter. She watched it go, then ran to the old lady. "It's no good, Gran," she said, "I shall have to go back."

"Back *weer?*" said Granny Thompson suspiciously.

Anita tossed her hair. "To Kettering, of course. Probably this afternoon. I want to find out just what's going on."

"'En't you ever 'ad enough?" groaned the elder Thompson. "Orl that squak an' kerfuffle; you wot *started* it orl, it were. Run y'in next time, put odds on it. An' *I* shen't bale yer...."

But the accusation, unfair as it was, fell on deaf ears. Anita was wholly preoccupied. Girls with violet eyes and brown hair to their waists shouldn't have to sit at supermarket checkouts. And they certainly shouldn't *weep*.

"She's super," said Anita breathlessly. "Sort of medieval nearly, I've never seen anybody *like* her. An' working in a place like that...." She opened a gate. "I shall have to borrow Jarmara," she said. "Or one of the little ones, the ones that can creep under things. I've got to find out exactly who she *is*...."

"Linette Hope," said Anita, chin in her hands. "That's lovely too, it really *suits* her. And she lives near Cransley somewhere. Leastways that's the bus she catches an' she only buys a tenpenny. She's supposed to be on some sort of training scheme, she was only supposed to be on checkout a week. But they won't let her off, they say she isn't good enough now. And it's driving her *crazy*, she's really *intelligent*, she's worth so much more than that. The others say she's stuck up an' it serves her right, two of them were talking in the lunchtime. But she's *not*, she's *not*. An' she daren't leave because of getting another job, her father says he wouldn't keep her, he'd put her in the *street*. He sounds absolutely *awful*. An' she can't get a flat or anything because they don't pay her enough. An' the other girls all hate her, they positively *hate* her. Just because she's pretty...."

"Wot stuff an' nonsense you do sometimes *tork*," snapped Granny Thompson irritably. "Bin pitchin' yer a fine yarn, she 'as. An' yer've *swallered* it...."

"She hasn't," said Anita, stung to

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the quick. "We haven't exchanged a single *word*...."

"Well, yer'd better soon start," snarled the old lady. "Sooner yer start, sooner yer'll find *out*. Linette this an' Linette that, mornin', noon an' night. Allus were mooney, yer were; if it wadn't this, it were that. An' if it wadn't that, it were *summat else*. An' yer dun't get no better; yer gits *wuss*." She wagged an ancient and lumpy finger at her granddaughter. "There's more ter that, my gel, than meets the *eye*. I knows these 'oomans; an' they ain't wuth both'rin' with, none on 'em. Om tole yer times enough; but yer dun't ever *learn*...."

"She *isn't* human," said Anita defensively. "She's more like one of *us*...."

Granny Thompson flung down her crochet work and grabbed for the evening paper. "While we're *on* the subjick," she said, "not as we're ever *orf* it, wot's orl this in the Tellygraph, about 'em 'avin' to 'ave the rat blokes in?"

Anita peered at the headline. PEST CONTROL OFFICERS VISIT LOCAL SUPERMARKET, it said. She swallowed. "It wasn't anything really," she said. "It was just that Jill got spotted. It wasn't her fault," she went on quickly. "I know what she's like, but she really was working *hard*. An' there was this great lout of an assistant trying to *hit* her with a piece of *wood*. So Jarmara just *had* to run between his legs, she didn't even *bite* him. Then Lin saw Sugar climbing out of her handbag an' nearly had a fit; an' that scared Jill so she went up the manager's trouser leg an'.... I mean, you can't *blame* her," she finished lamely. "*Can* you....?"

Her granny moaned. "Operatin' Familiars without a prior orthority," she said. "Get us both struck orf, yer will; then weer shall we be? Yer knows wot they're like, since they 'ad that there *compooter*...."

Anita frowned. There was justice in the old lady's complaint, she realized that. These were hard days for a freelance witch; all operations were supposed to be cleared in advance by Central now, and sometimes it took weeks. "Well," she said, "we shall have to do *something*, Gran. They've got this awful down on her, just because she's a girl. That manager's a beast as well, you should hear the way he sometimes talks to her. If we're caught, I shall just have to put it down to Private Research...."

Granny Thompson looked up sharply. "*Wot were that, gel?*"

Anita looked puzzled. "I said I'd have to put it down to Private Research."

"No," said the old lady testily. "Afore...."

"What? Oh, about Lin. I said they pick on her because she's a girl. There's laws about it now, but they just don't take any notice...."

A certain light had come into the old lady's eyes. "Gel", she said thoughtfully, "I dun't reckon as 'ow that's fair...."

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"Gran," breathed Anita in disbelief. "You're a Women's Libber!"

"I dun't know about that," said the old lady sharply. "I dun't 'old wi' them *noo-fangled notions, an' well you knows* it." She cast around her. "Git me that jar o' jollop orf the *shefferneer*," she commanded. "An' that noo book, that one wot come *Toosdey*...."

"But, Gran," said Anita, "what about the Clearance? You know what you just said...."

Granny Thompson gimleted at her. "If I wants ter do a bit o' Privite Reserch," she pronounced, "it en't nobody's affair but *mine*. Om gotta keep me *mind* active, en' I?"

"Gran," said Anita some time later, "what are you *doing*?"

Her granny held a small vessel to the light and stirred vigorously. She took out the teaspoon, shook it, and the bowl drooped in a rubbery sort of way from the stem. "'Ackles a bit," she muttered. She added three drops of darkish liquid from a vial; the potion gurgled and began to emit puffs of steam and a far from aromatic smell. "I dun't '*old* wi' folks bein' passed *uvver*," she went on. "So we gotta attract some *attention* to 'er, en't we? If more guz through 'er till than anybody else, they'll *atter* notice 'er, *wun't* they?"

"I don't know," said Anita slowly. "It sounds all right, I suppose it'll work...."

"Course it'll work," said Granny Thompson emphatically. "Dun't yer trust yer'ole gran ter be right? Not even *yit*?"

"Of course, Gran! But—"

"There en't no but about it," said the old lady, immersed once more in her book. "Now let me see...git me them there *hiscargots* out the pantry. I reckon they'll come in 'andy arter orl...."

Anita was thoroughly lost. "But, Gran, what *is* it?"

"*Ferry-moans*," explained the old lady with some pride. "Jist found out about 'em, they 'ave. Orl them scientist blokes. Jumped-up bits o' kids most on 'em, reckon they knows the lot. But they en't 'ardly started...."

The kitchen table was covered with vials and bottles; it seemed the entire stock of the potions cupboard had been called into use at one time or another. Anita had never seen such a complicated spell. Also there had been much chanting and drawing of cabalistic signs; both witches had been kept more than busy. But the brew was finally finished. Granny Thompson held it up. "Well, gel, wot do yer think?"

Anita took the tiny vessel carefully. Mysteriously, the potion seemed to have shrunk during manufacture; her granny had explained it away airily as "a controlled *foosion* process." Now there didn't seem to be more than a thimblefull, but it was very magic. Tiny tides moved in it, little coruscations of light played across its surface. Anita sniffed cautiously. At first there

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was nothing, just a sweet, powerful scent that reminded her a little of sandalwood. There *was* something else though. She inhaled more deeply; instantly she was falling head over heels through space, accelerating faster and faster to a very strange destination indeed. She rocked; her Granny snatched the little vessel away, and by degrees the room stopped spinning round. Anita swallowed, sat up and wiped her face. "Gran," she said in a small, admiring voice, "that's *awful....!*"

Linette Hope could never work out afterwards just how she got to be in Deadman's Copse. She didn't even know at first that was its name. She ran out screaming when it all just got too much, and she thought she got on the Cransley bus, but obviously she couldn't have because this one brought her in the opposite direction, right up by Wickstead Park. Then the conductor came and said that was as far as she could go, and she hadn't got any more money because she'd left her purse behind; so she just jumped down and ran as fast as she could, not looking back. When she did look round, the road was out of sight. Before her a long swell of land was crowned with trees; she walked on into the little wood, not caring. The trees were hung with fresh spring green and birds were singing everywhere, but it made her feel worse than ever.

It had been a bad day right from the start. There had been a row at breakfast, a really awful one, the worst so far; she ran out of the house, walked halfway to Kettering before the bus caught her up. Then Mr. Foswick said he couldn't have her at the checkout in jeans, what on earth was she thinking about coming to work like that. So there was another scene. They were lovely jeans too, new and dark blue and flared and bottom-hugging. But she still had to borrow an old frock from another of the girls, and it was miles too short, and they all started laughing—she nearly walked out there and then. Then the strange girl came in, the one who always seemed to be watching her. She was very pretty, she had brown hair and dark-blue eyes and really super figure, but she stared so hard sometimes it made Lin feel uncomfortable. She was nearly the first customer, and something got spilled all down the side of the checkout, she said it didn't matter, but the girl still ran away. She didn't look back, but Lin knew she was laughing too. Then the rest all started.

She didn't realize at first, just thought they were busy for a Monday. She kept her head down and worked the till as fast as she could, but the noise kept growing till suddenly she looked round. The other checkouts were deserted, the whole line of them; Mrs. Creswell and the rest sat glaring and tapping their fingers. Behind her though was this enormous crowd, get-

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ting bigger by the minute. They were fighting each other too, all trying to be first; fists and feet were flying, bottles and cans raining down all over. It was like about fifty rugger scrums all going on at once. Others were running in off the street; then Mr. Foswick got through somehow, with his collar pulled all out and his tie up round one ear, and started shouting about it being the last straw and not putting up with any more of it. Then this woman started yelling about who did he think he was trying to take her turn and all the rest started off as well and she quite lost sight of Mr. Foswick under the heap of bodies though she could hear him shouting from time to time and making gurgling noises. Mrs. Creswell had been rammed into a shopping cart somehow and couldn't get out; she was making an awful row and kicking about and cannoning off shelves and things. Then the police ran in and they started on them as well and she left the till and everything all unlocked and fled, and now she was here and she could never go back and the world had collapsed into little tiny pieces.

She looked up. She had reached the foot of a great gnarled oak tree crowning a little knoll. It seemed the king of the place almost, but it didn't care about her. Nobody cared about her, not in the whole wide world. She flung herself down by its huge, spreading roots and began to cry. The sobs got louder, and her shoulder was touched. She sat up wildly, glared round ready to bolt; then her face changed. "You," she said bitterly. "What do you want now? Just leave me alone...."

Anita swallowed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I only used a few spots too, I didnt realize. Gran did say it was strong...."

Lin jumped to her feet. "So it *was* you," she said furiously. "I knew it all along. An' I suppose you set those rats loose too...."

"They're *not* rats! It was only Jill an' Jarmara, they're nothing *like* rats. They're nothing like *anything* really," said Anita. "They're my Familiars...."

Lin clenched her fists. "You must be mad," she said. "And now you've played this trick I can't go back, not ever. I'm going to drown myself or jump off a building, I haven't decided yet. An' I hope you'll be *satisfied*...."

"But we were only trying to help—"

"Is *that* what you call it," shouted the checkout girl, chest heaving. "I'm glad you *told* me...." She started to run. "I don't want to *see* you again, not ever. If I do I'll...kill you...." She vanished among the trees.

There was something decidedly odd about the wood. It had seemed small enough when she entered it, but now it was endless. She walked and walked, for hours it seemed, and rage gave way to tiredness. She finally came to a little stream. The water looked cool and inviting. She drank from it, hoping vaguely it would give her typhoid. A little farther on, she reach-

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ed the edge of the trees at last. Beyond was a broad sunny meadow. A small white-washed cottage sat peacefully, smoke rising from its chimney. In front of it she saw the brook again, winding between low banks. There were stepping stones, round which the water chuckled pleasantly, and a clump of twisty old willows. By the first of them a pretty, brown-haired girl sat on the grass, her head in her hands. Beside her, anxiously, squatted a sleek Siamese cat. From time to time he put his paw on her knee, peered up to see into her face. Lin approached, soundlessly.

"But, Winijou," the brown-haired girl was saying, "you just don't *understand*. She's *beautiful*. An' when I saw how sad she was, I wanted so much to help. An'...now she hates me, she said I got her sacked, an' she'll never speak to me again an'...I want to *die*...."

It had come to Linette that what she had decided earlier on was true. Nobody *did* care, nobody in the entire world. She had no friends at all now, except one. And Mr. Foswick slowly vanishing under a flood of excited ladies really had been very funny. She sat down beside Anita. "It's all right," she said. "I'm not mad at you any more. Whatever it was you did, I know you were trying to help...." She felt in the pockets of the borrowed dress and found a tissue. "For heaven's sake," she said, "this isn't doing anybody any good. Just *blow*...."

"She's super, Gran," said Anita enthusiastically. "I've never met anybody *like* her. She's so clever, she knows about absolutely everything. She was going to university, she was going to do history, only her father said they couldn't afford it, she'd got to earn her keep. That's what's so *awful*. But she still knows about...oh, kings an' that, the Crusades, *everything*, she's lent me some super books. Did you know you can tell how old a hedge is by the trees that grow in it? It's *fascinating*...."

You can tell how old a hedge is by asking the creatures who live there or divining the nobbly roots of the hawthorn itself; but Anita, it seemed, had conveniently forgotten. She prattled on. "They've taken her back as well, she was really scared they wouldn't. But the manager said he didn't suppose it *was* her fault, not really, she was just scared running off like that. She says he isn't really too bad at all, not when you get to know him. She says—"

"Gorn *back?*" said Granny Thompson incredulously. "Arter wot 'e *said* to 'er an' orl?"

Anita frowned. "Yes," she said. "But you see she reckons—"

"Well, *I* wouldn't," said the old lady roundly. "Nor wouldn't nobody with ounce o' self-*rispect*. That there lot orl *chelpin'* at 'er; an' them there things blarin' an' 'ollerin' orl hours, wouldn't stick it five minutes I wouldn't. Ner more would you...."

Anita nodded. "It *is* sort of odd," she admitted. "There's masses of other

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jobs, I looked in the paper, she could do so much better. And she wouldn't have any trouble. I mean, she's...well, it would be easy. But when I said about it, Gran, she seemed positively *scared*. An' then she got mad again...."

Granny Thompson sighed. "Om *tole* yer til om sick of 'earin' it," she said. "'*Oomans* en't wuth a *candle*. There's summat a-gooin' on, my gel, wot you dun't know about. Smart though yer thinks yerself...."

Anita bit her lip. "You're right, Gran," she said worriedly. "I know there is, I can feel it. But she won't tell me. Just sort of-sheers off...."

The old lady sniffed. "There's *one* way ter find out," she said. "If yer *wants* to bad enough...."

"I can't *spell* her," said Anita indignantly. "An' I promised no more magic...."

"I en't suggestin' it," said the old lady with some asperity. "Orl om a-sayin', my gel, is that *four* legs is sometimes 'andier than *two*...."

"I don't know," said Anita doubtfully. "I'm a bit out of practice, I haven't done *that* for years...."

"Time yer got yer 'and back in then," snapped the old lady. "Or dun't yer reckon yer kin *manige*? Need a bit of *'elp* then, will yer?"

"No, thank you, Gran," said Anita frostily. "That won't be necessary."

The windows of the supermarket glowed cheerfully in the dusk. It was their late night; they wouldn't close till eight, but the large chestnut-brown cat who sat opposite in the doorway of the fishmongers seemed content to wait. It was a handsome animal, long-haired and with a spotless white bib, of which it seemed inordinately proud. Leastways it glanced down at it from time to time in a pleased-looking sort of way and even essayed the odd desultory lick, as if to ensure that its fur remained immaculately arranged. The street was busy, but for the most part the cat ignored the passers-by. Once, when a pretty girl stopped cooing, it did condescend to wave its tail and *prip* obligingly; but its eyes soon returned to the bright-lit frontage of the shop. Inside, Lin sat at the end checkout as busy as ever, lifting items from the endless stream of baskets and carts, dropping them onto the little conveyor belt, clicking away at the shiny grey till. The cat yawned and settled down to wait.

At eight the last shoppers were ushered out and a lad came along shooting the bolts on all the big glass doors. The cat became instantly alert. It trotted to the pavement edge, glanced left and right and streaked across the road like a brown shadow. Beside the supermarket ran what the locals would have called a *jitty*, a narrow alley leading to the car park at the back. The cat paused by the staff door, staring round. A wall, with an outhouse beyond, offered a vantage point. A quick spring, a scraping of claws, and the animal resumed its vigil.

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This time it wasn't for long. The door opened and two girls came out together. One was very pretty, with dark hair that hung nearly to her waist. The other, the blonde, must be Josie; Lin had said a couple of times she was the only nice one there. They turned right, toward the market place. The cat followed, keeping its distance discreetly, but neither of the girls looked back.

At first it seemed they were heading for the buses, but opposite the market place a small, rather depressed-looking pub proclaimed itself the Green Dragon. They glanced up at the sign and seemed to consider; then they vanished inside.

Cats do not frown, but they can certainly look puzzled. Their follower cast about uncertainly for a time; then it sprang to the nearest of the pub's lit windows. It crouched on the sill and peered. Inside, men were playing darts, talking animatedly in a haze of smoke. It jumped down, scurried along the pavement. The second window, muslin-curtained, gave onto a little snug. The girls sat at a corner table, glasses of fruit juice in front of them. Josie was talking animatedly, but Lin just looked dejected. She shook her head, and the other girl began again. The cat craned its neck, but the traffic noise from the road and the chatter of the other customers masked the voices.

It also masked the approach of a small, seedy-looking man in overcoat, muffler and battered cap, Nor did he at first observe the animal on the sill. Then his eyes, which were small, rheumy and set rather close together, lit up at the prospects of sport. "*Whurrup,*" he intoned to the rangy dog that skirmished at his heels, and the lurcher, thus encouraged, flung itself forward with a heart-stopping roar.

Few animals, however adept, can run up plain brick walls. But cats *in extremis* are capable of remarkable feats. The intended victim gained the top of a little dormer window, from which it spat and lashed its tail, glaring at the hunters as they ambled away. In time its nerves stopped jangling. At least it was safe enough here, and it could still see into the street. It blinked a few times, muttered to itself and settled to watch the moon rise over the great spire of the parish church.

The clock chimed the hours and quarters; and the "tail" was dozing pleasantly when voices sounded from below. It came round with a start, effected a hasty and spectacular descent. The girls had parted company already; Josie was striding off toward the bus stops, but Lin was heading back into the town. The distant chimes struck ten as she turned in beside the supermarket. She didn't stop but headed on toward the car park.

Her follower, by now, was both puzzled and alarmed. A hasty casting round, and it sprang onto the flat roof of the cold store, where fat ventilators emitted a muffled roaring and a gale of warm, meat-flavored air. It ran to the

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concrete edge, peered down. It saw the door of the place pop open, the square, foreshortened figure of a man emerge. Keys jangled, and a shadow detached itself from blackness, ran to him. "Oh, James," it said, "it's been so *long*...." The silhouettes blended; a sound like a little gasp, and Lin spoke again. "Please," she said. "Oh, please, let's get in the van."

The cat stayed frozen where it was, struck dumb, it seemed, with shock. Then its neck, which had extended concertina-fashion, contracted with equal suddenness. It blinked and swallowed, as if unable to believe the evidence of its senses. It jumped down, padded forward stiff-legged toward the rusty van parked by the supermarket wall. Scrapings sounded from inside, a muffled bump. The springs creaked faintly; then Lin's voice came once more. "At last," she whispered. "Oh, at *last*...."

The miles are nothing to a fleeing cat. London Road, the Park, passed like things in a dream; Kettering was lost over the horizon before it paused. It pounced then, in a wild red rage, on a fieldmouse that in another life had been its friend. It ate it, snarling, all but paws and tail. Later, it was very sick indeed.

Once, when Linette talked, the old fields of Northamptonshire had come alive. She knew everything about the Middle Ages; sowing grain and building churches, Dancing Manias and the Black Death, the Plague Stones where they threw the coins in vinegar. But that was over now, over for good. "It *isn't* what you're doing," shouted Anita. "It's *not*, it's *not*. It's the sordidness. Doing it in a grotty old *van!*"

Lin faced her, truculent and tear-stained. "Things *are* sordid," she shouted back. "Everything's sordid, sordid and hateful. Life's sordid, haven't you found that out yet? Don't you know anything at all?"

"But he's *years* older than you! Years and *years! That's* why your father gets mad! I suppose that's why you didn't go to college!"

"Yes," screamed Linette. "Because he had me when I was *fifteen* and he's been having me ever since and I don't *care!* And it's nothing to do with you and I hate you, I always did, I shall never speak to you again. You're just like all the rest. You think you're something special, but you're *just like all the rest*...."

"But I'm *not*, Gran," said Anita desperately. "She said the most awful things, that I was...jealous an' selfish, an' I only ever thought about myself, never her...an' it isn't *true*...."

Granny Thompson sighed, and laid her crochet work down. "Gel," she said to the air, "the times om *warned* yer. But it en't fer them, it en't ever bin fer them. It's fer *you*...."

Silence. The old lady cocked her head. "Anita?" she said. "Gel?"

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The air of the sitting room swirled, almost made a shape. There was a sob. "I *loved her,*" said Anita. "She was my *sister*...."

"An' then yer found it wadn't like that at *orl,*" said the old woman gently. "An' yer didn't want no *sharin'*. Gel, I *knows* yer, yer done it orl afore. Gel, that's 'oomans for yer. Choppin' an' changin' they are, orl on 'em, ken't sit still a *minit*. 'Ere terday an' gorn termorrer. Though I 'esspect yer ken't 'ardly blame 'em fer that...."

In the corner of the little room, a vase of new green beech leaves trembled violently. "You're right of course," said Anita sorrowfully. "I know that really, deep down. I've been a beast ...." The twigs shook again, and suddenly there was power. Granny's hair crackled; a small, slumbering Familiar woke and fled squawking. "Satan spare us," groaned the old lady. "Weer's the gel orf to *now*...."

Anita's voice shrilled, distant in her mind. "I'm going to *see* her, Gran," she said. "I've got to put it right. This very minute...."

Linette sat up in bed with the covers pulled to her chin. Her eyes were large and her face was still a little pale. "Well at least," she said, "I know you're...not an ordinary person now. But what on earth's *wrong?* It must be the middle of the night...."

"It is," said Anita shortly. She scotched on the bed. "Look, Lin, I've been absolutely rotten to you. Skulking about like that an' following you, an' then the things I said...." She swallowed. "It was all true," she said. "What you told me. Every word. Will you...forgive me? Please? I really want to help...."

The other girl set her lips. "You *can't* help," she said. "Nobody can. There's nothing to be done at all...."

"But there is, I'm sure there is. There must be something. But I have to know...all about it first. Lin, won't you *trust* me?"

Linette shot an alarmed glance at the door. "I *can't*, we shall wake my dad up. He's ever such a light sleeper...."

Anita grinned. "Not tonight he isn't," she said. "Lin, *tell me*...."

Lin gulped in turn. Then it all came out with a rush. How you see somebody in the street, and it doesn't matter at all at first except you can't quite get them out of your mind. And then you meet and talk, and after that you just can't keep away, it's like a magnet pulling. And you try to stop it but you can't, it grows and grows and there's nothing you can do; and everybody tells you, your parents tell you and all your friends, and you're throwing your life away, but it doesn't matter any more, nothing matters except that you're with the person, and when you're not you're aching right inside, all day and all night too. Till you get an awful job, an awful terrible job, and knowing they're close sometimes helps a bit even if you can't see them. And

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you nearly come to hate them too but by then it's just too late, it's like a sort of drug, you've got to have them all the time, be with them. "Like in the films," said Lin with bitterness. "It happens on all the films, it's supposed to be nice then. Well, it happens sometimes in real life too. Only then I suppose it's more a sort of disease...."

"Don't say that," said Anita, appalled. "Don't ever say a thing like that again...Lin, why can't you just go off? You know, do a bunk?"

"Where to?" asked Linette, starting to cry a little. "We haven't got any money, either of us. We couldn't go abroad; so wherever we went *she'd* find us. James' wife. He married her in London, when he was living there; and he didn't want her then, he told me so. She got him with an awful beastly trick, kept telling him she was pregnant. Now she wears *curling papers.* And she's been foul to him, she found out all about us early on, somebody saw us in a pub one night, you know what Kettering's like. And he doesn't like the supermarket either, he only stays there 'cos of us. He's an undermanager you see, there aren't all that many jobs. He had his own firm once, he was working with his dad, only they went bankrupt, that's why he came down here; he said if you can't break it up you've got to join it...." She smiled, wanly. "Amazing," she said, "the works of a modern supermarket. I think they call them Human Interest Stories...."

Anita frowned. "There's only just one thing," she said. "I'm sure of *you.* I've never really had any doubt. But are you sure of him? I mean, it would be terrible. If...." She let her voice tail away.

Lin looked serene. "I could *show* you," she said, "only it's getting late...."

"As a matter of fact, it isn't," said Anita airily. "I stopped Time for you, that's why your dad can't hear us...." And so the board came up, the floorboard under which Linette had stored her treasures, the silver dog-brooch that showed he was a faithful knight and the *triskele* that hadn't brought much luck and all the rest, the silly things that matter most of all: the skipping rope made from real jute, and the blue clock work penguin that could swim in a bowl of water, and the furry toys she couldn't have on the dresser, and the vibrator he had given her for when it got really bad, which Anita dropped when its purpose was explained as if it had suddenly got hot. But Lin just laughed. "It's the eighties now," she said, "you have to learn to live with things like that. They'll blow us all up soon; then we won't have to worry about anything, will we?" She opened a little album. "Look," she said, "that's me at the seaside. We actually went away for a whole weekend once. I said I was staying with a friend from school, and James was on a course. And that's us playing tennis, and that's us on the links...."

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Anita frowned at a color Polaroid. "Lin," she said, "what's this?"

Linette peered. "Oh, that was a party we went to years ago. Everybody was in fancy dress."

"So *that's* James," said Anita. She was excited now. "He's got a super face...." He had too, not handsome but sort of *broad*, with long-tailed greeny eyes. "It *suits* him," she said, hardly believing. "It's just right, he's a Medieval man...." A huge idea had dawned. "Linette," she said, "I *can* send you away. Both of you. Somewhere nobody would ever find you again...."

"But there *isn't* anywhere. I *told* you...."

"There *is*," said Anita, breathing quickly. "There *is*. And it isn't very far away at all...."

Lin looked uncertain. "Would I be able to...see you?"

Anita set her mouth. "No. But that doesn't matter. You'll *always* be my sister, nothing can change that...."

Linette put her face in her hands. "I wish I could split myself in two. So one of me could stay...Anita, you're the b-best friend I ever had...."

"Nonsense," said Anita briskly. Then it got to her as well and she took Linette in her arms. "You'll have to be ready," she said. "James too. I want you to come to a party. A *fancy-dress party*...."

Linette jumped back. "I couldn't, I just couldn't. I'd s-spoil it for everybody else...."

"You *wouldn't*," said Anita fiercely. "Lin, it's the only *way*...."

"The Great Charm," whispered Anita. "Please, Gran, just this once. You and Aggie could do it, I *know* you could...."

The old lady looked uncertain. "Well, I dunno, gel," she said. "Ken't do *that* without a Clearance, that's fer sure. An' they wun't *give* it." "Elpin' 'oomans, wotever next...."

"But, Gran, don't you see? We'd be helping them to *sin*. Damning their immortal souls, an' all that rot. They couldn't *refuse*...."

Her granny looked up sharply. "Gel," she said, "I never *thort* on it like that. I reckon it'd work...."

Party invitations are always exciting to get. But when they're brought by a seal-point Siamese with a collar of tinkling bells, they're things of wonder. Lin gripped James' hand the tighter, feeling her own heart thud. Winijou was still ahead of them somewhere; he'd met them at the road. Only now he seemed to have vanished. She ducked under low branches. Despite the times she'd been there, she was still not sure of Foxhanger after dark. It was all right though, because there was another cat. Large and stertorous this time; and though the moonlight made it hard to tell, it seemed a very odd color indeed. It arched its back and spat, but it too waved them on. And there was light at last, two twinkling spots of

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fire. Gateposts had been set up in front of the cottage; on top of each sat a portly little dragon, who sparked up if he thought you needed it. James drew back, but Linette laughed, feeling excitement go to her head like wine. "It's all *right*," she said. "Oh, do come on...."

She'd given her dress an awful lot of thought. Great ladies wore veils and hennins in those days, and girdles at their hips and lovely gowns; but she was no great lady, she was a checkout girl. So she'd come barefoot, in russet. There were flowers in her hair though, and James looked good as well in his jerkin and leggings and funny nightcap hat.

Anita met them at the door. She never had been able to pass up a chance, the things she'd done with ermine were beyond belief. Lin swallowed, and dropped low. "*Mi levdi*," she whispered, right in her part already, but Anita pulled her up, laughing. "Come *on*," she said. "Everybody's here, I want you to meet them *all*...."

Surely, thought Lin, she must be dreaming already, because the cottage wasn't a cottage anymore, not once you got inside. An ox was roasting in the great hall, the spit turned by some highly improbable Things; and candles, hundreds of them, were making a mist of light, and musicians were playing high up on a gallery, strange instruments that wailed and bonked above the roar of talk. "These are my friends the Carpenters," shouted Anita. "This is Charles and this is Sir John, he's really very famous. John, that tabard's *great*, it's really you....An' these are my cousins from Northampton, an' this is Mr. MacGregor, he's a really super vet, an' this is Ella Mae, she's flown from America specially. I mean Long Strand, where all the Indians are.... An' this is Mr. Strong, he's come all the way from Dorset...." And on and on; Lin had lost track before she was halfway through.

"Gran said to say hello," yelled Anita, even louder than before. "Only she can't come for a mo', she's busy with the spell...." And certainly from a side room were coming rumblings and concussions, interspersed with irate shouts. "Aggie, ken't you even *count..:? Well yer'll atter*, I ken't find me *glasses*...."

There were goblets of wine, great tankards of mead and beer. Lin's head was spinning before they danced *La Volta*. Then the figures swirled into fresh and stately patterns, because Time was getting older all the while, and it was a *pavane*. "For a dead princess," gulped Anita, the wine making her light-headed. Her hand touched Lin's, the last time ever, and suddenly there was nothing. Just the two of them, and a funny sort of mist.

Lin dropped to her knees. She said, "Where's *James*..." and Anita laughed. "It's all right," she said. "He's here...."

Lin stared round her, at the silence. "What's happened?" she asked dazed-

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ly. "Where's the *spell?*"

Anita laughed again. She said, "You're right *inside* it," but the other shook her head. "It was just a party," she said. "It was lovely, but they always end the same."

"Not this one," said Anita. Her eyes were glowing strangely. "Come outside...."

They followed her, stood staring. The woods looked different somehow, in the early light. The bushes were coppiced, as they used to be; great mounds of leaves made homes for creeping things. And it was quiet, so quiet, not a sound, in the whole breathing world.

Lin's voice was very small. "Anita...where are we?"

Anita smiled. "Near home," she said, and pointed. "There's a big hill over there. One day they'll build a town on it called Kettering. It'll have supermarkets. All sorts of funny things...."

It was a tiny whisper. "*When* are we then?"

Anita swallowed. "They'll fight Agincourt tomorrow," she said. She turned to James. "You'll be one of the Gentlemen Abed. But I don't suppose you'll mind that at all, will you? I wouldn't...."

She pushed her hair back. "You don't *have* to go," she said. "You're still being *shown*...." She hesitated. "It wasn't...all maypoles an' dancing, you know. People...didn't live that very long...."

She'd already seen the look in his eye though. He rubbed his face and spoke for the first time that whole night. "But how we'll live, girl," he said huskily. "How we'll *live*...."

Anita touched the great quiver of arrows on his shoulder. "You're not James anymore then," she said to him. "You're Jack the Fletcher, an' this is your lawful wife. Her name is Linet ...." She couldn't stand anymore then, so she ran away. Because that's how it has to be when you really have a friend. You love them as hard as you can, and then you let them go.

When she looked back they were already running down the slope. Linet turned once, she thought she saw her wave; then the morning mist had swallowed them both.

"Checked out," whispered Anita. She sat a long time with her head down, but when she straightened up her face was calm. The cottage was making itself again behind her, like a pale blue picture of a house, and Kettering forming, far off on its hill.

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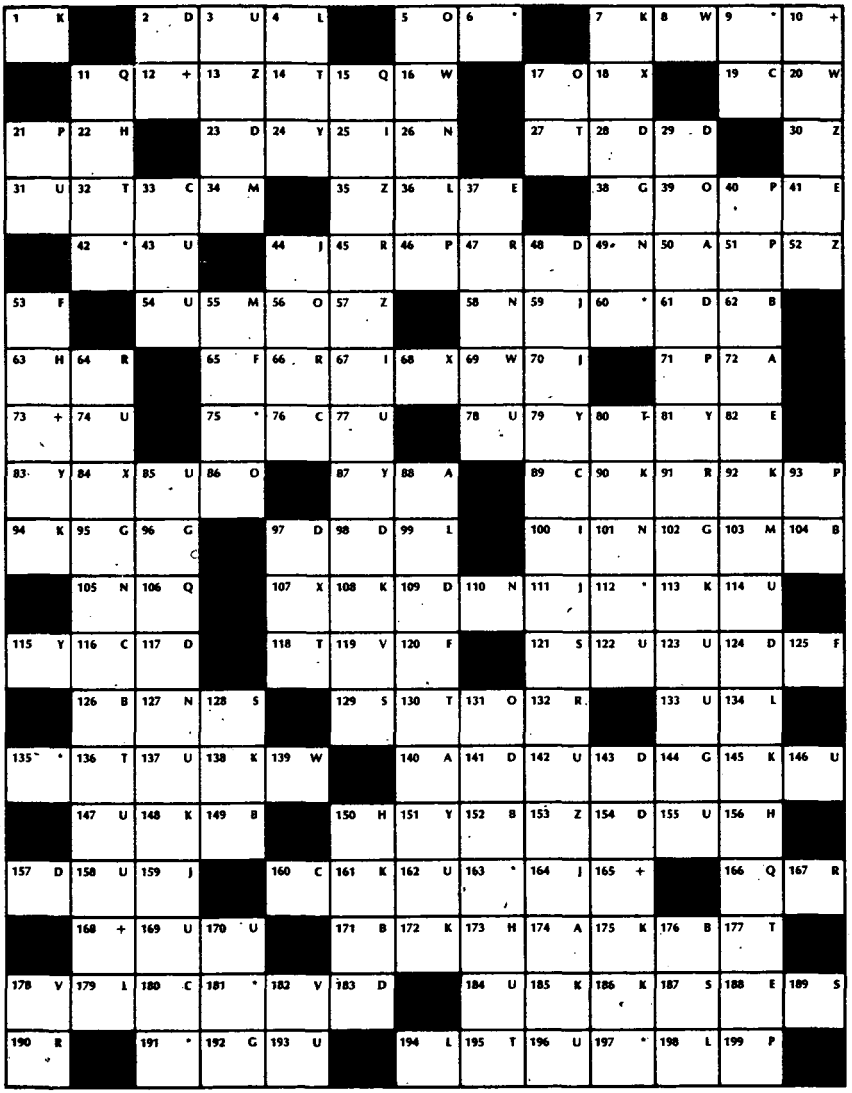

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Acrostic Puzzle

by Rachel Cosgrove Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Mr. Gordon

88 140 174 72 50

B. Sf mag wants this.

152 149 104 171 62 126 176

C. ____ of Panama or Suez.

89 160 33 76 19 116 180

D. Where Ursula shapes her stories (4 words).

117 28 29 23 157 109 97 141 61 2

124 48 98 143 154 183

E. Gusto.

188 82 41 37

F. ____we forget: Kipling.

65 120 53 125

G. Prohibit by injunction.

96 95 38 102 144 192

H. THE ____ AT HAND: Blish.

63 156 150 173 22

I. SF illustrator.

100 67 25

J. Roots of taro.

59 159 70 111 164 44

K. Harlan's warning (2 words).

185 138 161 113 145 7 148 1 90 175

186 172 108 94 92

L. Succeeded in descending (two words).

194 36 198 99 134 4 179

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M. To be indebted for.

55 103 34

N. ____ Roman of them all.

127 105 58 101 26 49 110

O. Law maker.

86 39 56 17 5 131

P. Reversion to earlier type.

46 40 71 21 51 199 93

Q. "The ____ Is Silence": C. L. Grant.

106 15 11 166

R. Instrument for ear exam.

91 64 167 190 47 66 45 132

S. A lode.

121 189 128 129 187

T. Operation for bladder stones.

136 32 27 195 80 118 130 14 177

U. Sturgeon classic (six words).

133 31 170 78 122 114 123 137 147 169

77 85 162 193 146 3 155 142 158 54

184 196 43 74

V. Clamor.

119 178 182

W. Priestly vestment.

69 139 8 20 16

X. What sf writers want to sell.

107 84 18 68

Y. Calcareous concretion in inner ear.

115 151 87 81 24 83 79

Z. Brother's son.

57 13 52 35 153 30

+. Sends forth.

12 10 73 168 165

*. By Bishop (two words).

197 75 42 60 9 112 6 191 163 181

135

Answer will appear in the March issue.

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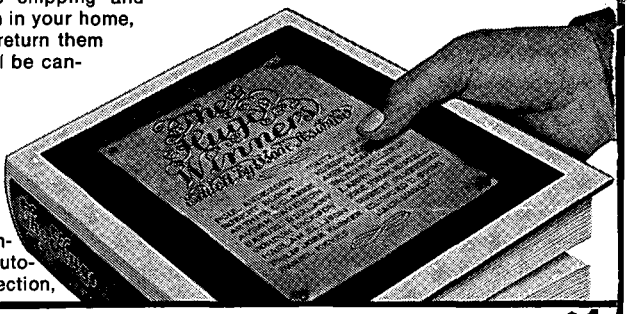

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